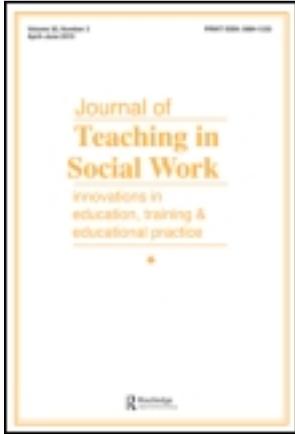


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### Service Learning in an Undergraduate Social Work Research Course

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## **Service Learning in an Undergraduate Social Work Research Course**

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*The current study examined student experiences (n = 111) in an undergraduate social work (BSW) research seminar in which a service learning (SL) project was the primary focus. Student groups of approximately six or seven worked with local agencies to develop a research plan for the agency. Students found the SL project to be a positive experience. The SL outcomes resulted in a greater appreciation of research, including a greater interest in and comfort with conducting research. Results also are compared to a similar SL project in which the entire class, rather than a small group, worked with one agency. The implications are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS** *service learning, research, undergraduate education, field work, community-based education*

Despite the importance of social work research for practice, policy, and the advancement of knowledge, student perceptions of research are inherently negative. Several studies support this conclusion. In a comparison of graduate-level students in social work, psychology, and business, social work students were most likely to report anxiety over research and least likely to report that research was important to their field (Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001). Math anxiety might provide some explanation for social work students' dislike of research (Royse & Rompf, 1992). Although Royse and Rompf did not test this hypothesis, they did find that

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undergraduate social work (BSW) students had significantly higher levels of math anxiety and had taken fewer math courses in high school and college. In another examination of BSW students, lack of statistical knowledge was associated with a fear of research (Secret, Ford, & Rompf, 2003). Over the past 7 years of teaching research, this author has asked students for the first word that comes to mind when they hear the word “research.” Student responses are usually negative.

Social work research courses assist students to build skills that will allow them to critically evaluate practice, become informed consumers of research, assess studies and the ways findings could impact oppressed or marginalized groups, and consider diversity within the context of research. Without social work research courses, social workers would have fewer skills to accomplish such tasks. Still, the anxiety social work students feel over research has led to a low interest in learning research course content and a consequent overreliance on practices that have no evidence of effectiveness (Kirk, 1999).

Service learning (SL) is an active teaching approach that increases student interest in course content, leading to greater motivation to learn. SL is

a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and 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. (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222)

Bringle and Hatcher note that SL increases student interest, brings new energy to the classroom, teaches new problem-solving skills, and often makes teaching more enjoyable.

### SERVICE LEARNING IN RESEARCH COURSES

SL is a natural fit for social work wherein core values include service and competence (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2006). Students provide a service through the SL project and build skills in the process that improve their competence. SL involves assistance to a population in need and can increase knowledge of course content—be that research, policy, or practice (Droppa, 2007; Kapp, 2006; Lemieux & Allen, 2007)—as applied to a specific population. SL projects provide students with opportunities to apply the NASW Code of Ethics to real-world situations, navigate the challenges of institutional review boards, develop solutions to data collection issues, and produce a product that will benefit an agency and the population whom the agency serves.

Several social work educators have written about using an SL approach in research courses. They report assigning a variety of SL projects for their social work research courses, including completing a manuscript for peer review (Lundahl, 2008), needs assessment (Knee, 2002), or program evaluation plan (Kapp, 2006). Student reports of experiences with these projects are uniformly positive.

Lundahl (2008) had the students in a masters-level social work research course survey homeless shelter administrators about management needs, shelter resident needs, and the role of volunteers in meeting these needs. The students then developed the first draft of a manuscript for peer review that later was accepted for publication. Students were involved in each phase of the study, with the exception of identifying the topic, and reported that involvement in the project was meaningful and increased their understanding of research.

Knee (2002) had students in a BSW research course design and conduct a survey assessing housing needs of low-income people who were eligible for a proposed housing unit. Students reported that “understanding and solving problems in this field” and “applying the course material to the real world” (p. 218) were much greater in this course when compared to other college courses they had taken. An “overwhelming majority” (p. 219) of students reported that the SL experience enhanced their understanding of research and bridged the gap between theoretical discussions of research and its practical application.

In an SL project wherein BSW research students created a program evaluation plan for an agency, students reported that the SL project was a very valuable way to learn, that they learned a great deal overall, and that they had produced a credible deliverable for the agency (Kapp, 2006). The students noted that they developed the skills to work with agency personnel to actually design a research project. In another SL project, MSW research students utilized data from a community agency to conduct studies and then presented results and recommendations to the agency at the end of the semester. Students appreciated that course content was applied to a real agency, and they reported significant increases in meeting course learning objectives (Harder, 2010).

In the SL approaches described by Kapp (2006), Knee (2002), and Lundahl (2008), each utilized one agency with which students worked as a class cohort. Subgroups were formed, however, to accomplish various tasks such as completing sections of the report. Harder (2010) utilized multiple agencies, but the students completed individual projects. The SL approach described in this study also utilized multiple agencies—students in groups of approximately six working with one agency. Smaller groups, rather than the entire class, completed the project so that students were required to take responsibility, often with a partner, for multiple sections of the report.

The goal was to give students more hands-on experience with multiple aspects of the research process than might be possible if only one agency were utilized. Working in groups provided students with the opportunity to build interpersonal skills by working cooperatively to accomplish a large undertaking—something they will face often upon entering the workforce.

Study findings can inform teaching, providing evidence whether such a SL approach is an effective method of delivering content required in a BSW research course. Research questions are as follows:

1. How do students perceive the SL project?
2. Does this SL approach result in a greater interest and comfort in conducting research?

### STRUCTURE OF THE SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

The current study builds on the work of Kapp (2006), who required students in his SL course to design a program evaluation plan for one community social service agency. Findings from Kapp's research were based on responses from 27 students in one section of the course. The current study used essentially the same assignment and planning process described by Kapp, going beyond his model by applying the same SL approach to include multiple agencies each semester. Two to four student groups of approximately six students in each class completed agency-based research projects, rather than the entire class completing one agency-based research project. Student surveys, slightly modified from the survey utilized by Kapp, were collected over 4 years (2006–2009) from the six sections of this course taught by the author.

As noted, this author's approach differed from Kapp's by the use of multiple agencies rather than a single agency. In each section of the course, students were divided into small groups and assigned to an agency. Students visited the agency shortly after it was assigned to them, with the hope that they would thereby more clearly connect the SL assignment to the people whom the agency served. Because a multiple-agency approach was used, the author created numerous handouts, modified from the work of several authors (Rubin & Babbie, 2005; Westerfelt & Dietz, 2001). These materials were developed to guide students through the project and provide direction when the instructor was working with other groups during class.

The SL project under examination in the current research was part of a BSW course that is the second in a two-semester research sequence. The first semester offers a broad overview of research in which students learn the steps in the research process. In the second semester, students apply what they learned in the first semester to an actual agency, developing a workable research plan based on the real needs of an actual social service

agency in the community. The SL project process was generally the same as described by Kapp (2006), so only a brief description is provided here.

### Project Tasks

More preparation is necessary to set up the SL project than a traditionally taught course. It is necessary to contact local agencies and secure their commitment before the semester begins, so agencies must be identified in the semester prior to the course. It is important to identify individuals with a reputation for working well with students. It would appear that choosing agency staff who enjoy working with students is more important than choosing the “correct” agency (Kapp, personal communication, November 15, 2005). Recommendations for agencies and individuals were obtained from the Social Work Field Education Office and faculty and by word of mouth.

Once agencies are identified, with approximately one agency for every six students, the instructor makes initial contact via e-mail, describing the project and inquiring whether staff might be interested in participation. If so, a meeting is scheduled. At that meeting, the instructor again explains the SL project, including the roles of the agency, students, and instructor; the time commitment required of the agency; and examples of past work. Staff and the instructor discuss agency information needs and how research might address such needs. From this discussion, a research question is developed. Although the research question later may be modified, this level of specificity assists students to quickly begin discussing how the research question may best be answered.

On the first day of class, students are oriented to the project. A number of documents are distributed, all of which are also available online. Students are first provided with a handout describing the SL project in general, with information almost identical to that contained in the initial e-mail sent to agencies. The instructor reviews this document with students who are assigned to agencies. The instructor then reviews with students a second handout that briefly describes the different sections of the report that students will have to write, along with a list of suggested group tasks, such as editing and project managing. Students are encouraged to consider their strengths and weaknesses as they decide which tasks they will undertake. For example, strong writers are well suited to writing the literature review and editing. Students who procrastinate are probably not the best choice for managing the project, putting together the final proposal, or creating the slides for the agency presentations. Interim assignments, such as drafts of each report section, are discussed as well.

During the first class session, students also receive a step-by-step guide that describes the tasks to be accomplished for each section of the research plan. This handout contains references to supporting documents that students may utilize to complete their sections. For example, there are

documents to assist with each of the following: the literature review, sampling, the logic model, timeline development, and table of contents. Finally, students are presented with a list of questions to ask the agency when they meet agency representatives the following week. (Agencies also receive this list prior to the first meeting with students.) Students are encouraged to ask additional questions as well and decide how the tasks of asking questions and taking notes will be accomplished.

During the second week of class, agency staff members attend class. The instructor usually reserves space at a central location on campus to ensure multiple meeting rooms and easy access for agency staff. All meetings with agencies during the semester are held at this location. Meeting in such a setting provides a more professional atmosphere outside of the classroom. At the beginning of this class, all agencies and students meet together. As an element of contracting, the instructor reminds attendees of the purpose of the project: to complete a plan for carrying out research at the agency. The purpose of the meeting is also restated. Students will learn about the agency and research question(s), set up the agency visit, and determine the best way to contact agency staff as project-related questions arise. Student groups and agency representatives then go to their respective meeting rooms, and the instructor moves from room to room to observe, monitor progress, and provide feedback as needed.

In the third class, student groups discuss the research question posed by the agency and identify the research design best suited to address the question. Students are assisted by the step-by-step handout distributed in the first class. This document poses several questions for students to consider to assist them in determining the most appropriate research design—survey, qualitative, single subject, or experimental/quasi-experimental. The instructor continually consults with group members as they discuss potential approaches. The instructor is careful not to give students the answer but instead asks questions to help students determine for themselves the most appropriate research design.

The fifth class generally is reserved for students to visit the agency. A class session was chosen for this purpose to decrease the challenges of coordinating multiple student schedules for a site visit. The agency visit provides students with an opportunity to see the agency in action and to more clearly connect their project work with actual clients. Should a student not be able to attend on this date, he or she has until after spring break (Class 9) to visit the agency.

A portion of each class, weeks 3 through 13, is devoted to individual and small-group work on proposal sections; the only exceptions are week 5, when students visit their agencies, and weeks 6 and 11, when students present to their agencies (Table 1). During each class, the instructor serves as a consultant, reviewing work and providing feedback; discussing challenges students are having with particular sections, one another, or the agency; and assisting with technical issues such as formatting tables and setting up data

**TABLE 1** Service Learning Project Reporting Schedule

Reporting Schedule	Description	Time Line
Project section drafts	A minimum of one draft of each section is due to instructor.	Weeks 4–13
Present work to agency staff	In a meeting of the entire class and all agencies, students present the current version of project for feedback regarding feasibility, etc. Written reports and slides are presented.	Week 6 & 11
Turn in final projects	After final agency meeting (Week 11), students make final revisions to project and give to instructor for reproduction.	Week 14
Produce final project	Final project is produced in monograph form.	Week 15
Agency meeting	Instructor meets with agency to deliver report.	2–4 weeks after final class

*Source:* Modified from Kapp, 2006.

entry spreadsheets. When discussing issues related to proposal sections, the instructor is careful not to tell students what they should do but instead asks probing questions to stimulate students' thinking in ways that will guide them to the answer. Student groups also use this class time to work together on sections, obtain group feedback, plan next steps, and resolve group issues.

### Project Reporting Schedule

A number of products are due before the final proposal is turned in (see Table 1). Originally, drafts of each section of the proposal were not formally required, and students often waited until near the end of the semester to have the instructor review their work. This timeline resulted in a large amount of work for the instructor near the end of the project and limited time for students to make revisions. Consequently, a draft of each proposal section now must be turned in for review by the instructor at dates staggered throughout the semester, specified in the course syllabus. Depending on the quality of the work, additional drafts are reviewed until the instructor is satisfied with the content and writing quality.

Approximately 1 month after the initial meeting with the agency, staff members return for a progress report. Students provide an update on each section of the report and ask questions of agency staff. Students often use some of this time to review the logic model for accuracy, discuss informed consent, and ensure the sampling plan is realistic. The entire class meets together so that all groups are familiar with what the other groups are doing. Although students are in continual communication with staff to ensure all aspects of the research plan are feasible for the agency to implement, this presentation provides students with experience presenting to an audience

beyond only classmates and obtaining feedback in a more public setting in real time.

Agencies return to class 3 weeks before the final proposal is due. By this time, students have most of the information they need to complete the research plan. This meeting is often short because there are fewer questions to address. Groups frequently use the time to focus on only one or two aspects of the project, such as surveys or other sections for which the group has not received agency feedback. (To ensure accuracy, students must have the agency read and approve the program description section prior to printing.) Students then have 3 weeks to complete the proposal, including two CDs on which all proposal documents are saved. One copy goes to the agency, and one copy remains with the instructor.

The instructor has the proposals copied and bound, including copies for agencies, students, and instructor. Students receive their copy during the final class session. The instructor then schedules a meeting with each agency to deliver the students' report, discuss implementation needs, and obtain feedback on project process from the agency's perspective.

### Project Sections

Most research plans follow an outline similar to what is shown in Table 2. An appendix is included that may contain such items as the logic model,

**TABLE 2** Service Learning Project Report Sections

Report Section	Description
Introduction	Introduction to the report including the purpose, significance, research question, and summary of contents.
Literature review	Literature review addressing topics relevant to the research question(s) resulting in a comprehensive literature review for agency.
Program description	A detailed description of the program including information about services, clients, and a logic model.
Research design	Strengths and weaknesses of the proposed research design, threats to internal validity (if applicable), and suitability to agency.
Measurement and data collection	Description of variables, how variables will be measured, data source(s), reliability and validity of measure(s), and who would collect data. Data collection tools such as survey(s), code book, scoring instructions, and spreadsheet on which to enter data.
Sample design	Description of sampling approach including number of cases, sampling method, identification of sample, and strengths and weaknesses of the proposed approach.
Protection of human subjects	Description of how study participants will be protected including consent forms and human subjects application.
References	List of all sources referenced in the report. A separate list of resources is sometimes included as well, depending on agency needs.

*Source:* Modified from Kapp, 2006.

data collection materials, consent forms, and any other resources deemed helpful to the agency.

## METHODS

### Sample

Data for the current study were collected from 111 students in six sections of the author's BSW research seminar over 4 years (2006–2009), the second course of a two-semester research sequence. The majority of students, approximately 89%, were female. Approximately 89% of students were White, 3% were Latino, 3% were Native American, 3% were African American, and 6% were from other ethnic minority groups. Student project groups ranged from 5 to 12 students, averaging 7 students per group. A total of 19 groups created research plans for 19 agencies.

### Data Collection and Measurement

The data collection instrument was a modified version of the survey utilized by Kapp (2006). This six-page survey contained open- and closed-end questions that asked students about their experiences in the two-semester BSW research sequence and their assessment of the SL project, including an evaluation of themselves, their peers, and the SL group process. Open-end questions included "What are some important things you learned this semester?" and "How will what you learned this semester influence you as a social worker?" Closed-end items were generally seven-point Likert scale items with response options that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Items included "I felt the research proposal was a valuable way to learn about agency-based research"; "I learned a lot about agency-based research"; and "My group produced a credible piece of work for the agency." For each Likert scale item, a comments section was provided for students to expand on their answers. Students also were asked to rate the degree to which each course objective was accomplished during the semester from 1 (Low) to 10 (High).

Surveys were not anonymous, as students were asked to rate the performance of their group members for a portion of each student's participation grade. The first year, students completed surveys during the last class session at the instructor's house where the class met to receive a copy of the final product, eat lunch, and discuss their experiences. In following years, students were instructed to complete the survey prior to this last class meeting in an effort to reduce threats to reliability and validity. Institutional review board approval for the research was obtained from the university where this research was conducted.

**TABLE 3** Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3
1. Valuable way to learn	–		
2. Learned a lot about agency-based research	.75	–	
3. Produced credible work	.57	.47	–
<i>M</i>	6.59	6.51	6.78
<i>SD</i>	.71	.70	.46

*Note:* Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*.  
*N* = 111. All associations are significant at  $p < .05$ .

## Analyses

Quantitative data were entered in Excel and then converted to the SPSS. Univariate analyses were utilized to examine student survey responses to the seven-point Likert scale items. Correlation was used to examine bivariate associations between variables. Qualitative data were sorted by question and entered verbatim into tables in Word. Student comments are presented, providing greater depth to responses than possible with quantitative ratings alone.

## RESULTS

Student feedback was extremely positive. Findings are reported by research question with correlation matrix statistics presented in Table 3.

RQ1. How do students perceive the SL project?

Students believed the project was a valuable way to learn about agency-based research (6.6), they learned a lot about agency-based research from the project (6.5), and their group produced a credible piece of work for the agency (6.8; see Table 3). Students were particularly excited that agencies intended to use these research plans and that their work could potentially assist clients served by these agencies:

*I really enjoyed executing the proposal for B.W. [agency]. I like how valuable our work is to the agency. . . [agency contact] seemed super impressed and already had board approval to use [our proposal] before we were completely finished. [agency] did not have any surveys or measures to utilize. I believe that at the very least this will be a valuable asset for the facilitators. I learned you have to know a lot of background information to tailor it to a participating agency.*

RQ2. Does this SL approach result in a greater appreciation of research?

Students also expressed greater confidence in their research abilities as a result of the research seminar, a large portion of which was the SL project:

*I'm much more interested in doing my own research.*

*I feel more adequately prepared to interpret research, to perform my own research, and to create a proposal or any type of document for a superior. I've learned to question data and read things on a deeper, less face value level.*

*. . . I have gained confidence in areas that many people may be intimidated by, i.e., technical writing, statistics, measures, and research. These skills that I have learned this year will strengthen my confidence and my ability as a social worker.*

An increased awareness of the importance of research for social work was common:

*I truly understand the importance of research on an agency level. . . . I like the way social workers can use research they perform to perhaps change policies and laws.*

*I now know that not all social workers have to be case managers. Research is also very important! I interpret research findings all the time.*

*They have taught me about a whole new aspect of social work that is not transparent. It made me realize if something is not working we can find out why and how to fix it.*

For a few, the SL project sparked a greater interest in conducting research as well:

*This year will influence everything about how I practice social work. After this class I am serious[ly] considering pursuing my doctorate so I can do both research and teaching.*

*. . . this class has really sparked a personal interest in research.*

*The proposal was very interesting. I did not think I would ever like research but I am a little interested now.*

## DISCUSSION

Study data confirm the author's observations that the SL project served multiple functions. Students reported an increase in motivation to learn research course content, interest in the subject matter, and understanding of the importance of research for social work. Research questions are briefly reviewed as they relate to previous studies. Limitations and implications are then discussed.

RQ1. How do students perceive the SL project?

Students felt that the SL project was a valuable way to learn about agency-based research and that the end product would be of use to the agency. Students who present their work to external audiences, such as a community agency, work harder than when work is presented internally as homework submitted to the instructor (Harder, 2010; Pascual, 2010). Students felt the work they were doing was important. In the current study one student noted that “. . . I feel that I took this project more seriously than I might [have] if it was a made up agency.” The importance of the real-life implications of SL projects is supported by Harder (2010), who notes that projects that apply to real world situations tend to increase motivation. Lam (2004) also found that the support of a group decreased stress and motivated social work students. Applying course content to an actual agency enriched students’ experiences and benefitted the agency.

RQ2. Does this SL approach result in a greater interest and comfort in conducting research?

Students reported increased research competence, an appreciation of research for social work, and a greater interest in research. Study findings support past examinations of social work research course content taught within a SL context (Anderson, 2002; Harder, 2010; Kapp, 2006; Knee, 2002; Lundahl, 2008). All these authors reported positive student experiences including increased research skills and realization of the importance of research for social work. It appears that active learning approaches such as SL engage students more fully and may be a particularly useful teaching tool for some of the required courses in which students may be less interested.

### Limitations

The current study was not without limitations. Data were self-reported. If additional sources had been used to assess student learning, such as grades, the results may have been different. Additionally, personality traits such as self esteem and reticence influence how students assess themselves (Sharp, 2006). Also, surveys were not anonymous, which may have influenced validity, although the instructor assured students that their comments were confidential and that she desired honest feedback—positive and negative; nor was there an actual comparison group. Comparison to sections of research taught without an SL component would be necessary to determine whether SL is more effective than traditional (less active) learning approaches.

An alternate explanation for study findings might be that the group process, more than the SL approach, was what impacted student learning. Still, this explanation is not complete, because students continually reported

that their learning was greatly enriched by working with an actual agency to create a product that the agency could utilize.

### Implications

It is likely that the findings from this study may be applicable to similarly structured baccalaureate programs. It should be noted in this regard that the positive impact of SL found in the current study is similar to other SL studies with social work research students at universities in Illinois (Anderson, 2002); Montana (Knee, 2002); Nebraska (Harder, 2010); and Utah (Lundahl, 2008). Research currently in progress is examining differences in the SL experience for traditional BSW students on the main campus compared to students on a satellite campus that is located in a more urban area and attended predominantly by nontraditional students (older, parents, often working in the social service field) and a greater number of students of color. This additional research also is examining differences in student learning for SL projects compared to other less-service-oriented projects across research, policy, and practice courses.

Current study findings support the notion that using a SL approach in a research course engages students in learning course content, invests them in the process, and provides experience with the actual application of material and with collaboration. There are several implications for social work practice and research based on these findings. Increased interest in learning research course content and a greater understanding of the importance of research for social work can translate into greater rigor in the field as these students enter the workforce. As evidenced from student comments, it is likely that these new social workers will pay greater attention to research-related issues such as the evaluation of practice, assessing measures for cultural competency, and ensuring informed consent. In some cases, SL projects appear to be the initial impetus for doctoral level work, so it is possible that students in research courses with a SL component will be more likely to pursue a doctoral degree in social work than social work students whose experience with research is in a more traditional format.

Still, follow-up, along with a comparison to social workers who had no such SL experience in their research classes, would be necessary to confirm such anticipated benefits. What these findings do suggest is that SL is an effective teaching approach for social work research and, as research is essential to the future of social work, any approach that can bolster student interest and engagement should be considered.

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