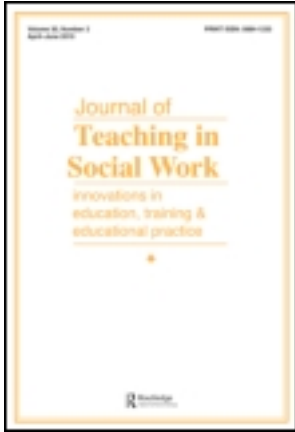


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Implementing a Service Learning Model for Teaching Research Methods and Program Evaluation

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Implementing a Service Learning Model for Teaching Research Methods and Program Evaluation

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In an effort to teach students the basic knowledge of research methods and the realities of conducting research in the context of agencies in the community, faculty developed and implemented a service learning model for teaching research and program evaluation to foundation-year MSW students. A year-long foundation course was designed in which one instructor taught a research methods course (scientific methods in social work) and an evaluation course (evaluation in social work) consecutively with the same group of students. The primary focus of these courses was on student group research projects with agencies in the community. This design was developed to deepen students' learning of research by (1) promoting continuity in instruction, (2) removing redundancies in content between two research courses, and (3) extending the time needed for rigorous program evaluation projects with community agencies. The strengths and challenges in implementation are discussed.

KEYWORDS service learning, research, graduate education, program evaluation, agency collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Practitioner comprehension and use of research has been recognized by the profession of social work as a critical practice competency and a necessary prerequisite for the field of social work to be considered a profession (Rubin & Parrish, 2007). In this regard, the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008) clearly states that research competency is a professional responsibility. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (2008) require that all accredited programs teach all students to “Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research” (EPAS, 2008, Educational Policy 2.1.6). Yet, there remains concern that graduate social work education does not produce practitioners who value the importance of scientific evidence related to their practice and who have the skills to apply research findings to meet the challenges they and their clients face (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003; Rubin & Parrish, 2007).

In an effort to strengthen research/practice connections, faculty in an accredited MSW program developed and implemented a service learning model for teaching research methods and program evaluation. A year-long course was developed to deepen students’ learning in research methods and program evaluation through two foundation-year courses, scientific methods in social work and program and practice evaluation in social work. The primary focus of these courses was on student group research projects with agencies in the community. This model was proposed to improve efficiency in teaching by (1) promoting continuity in instruction, (2) removing redundancies in content, and (3) extending the time needed to conduct rigorous evaluation projects. Teaching research has a long history in social work; however, MSW programs have struggled with identifying the best method for teaching research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching Research in Social Work

Traditionally, MSW students have struggled with accepting research content as a legitimate part of their professional skill development and have grappled with understanding the important connection between research and effective practice (Rubin & Parrish, 2007). Graduating MSW students tend to feel unprepared for practice and, in exit interviews, have reported that they would have preferred more practice-related courses in place of required research courses (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). Additionally, social work students consider their research courses to be anxiety-producing and the largest obstacle they faced in completing their MSW program (Forte, 1995; Howard et al., 2003). Finally, social work practitioners view research as

an academic concern and not a practice pursuit (Anderson, 2002). Clearly, social work educators still struggle with identifying an instructional strategy to help students value the research/practice connection.

Teaching research courses only using a didactic instructional method has been recognized as an ineffective teaching strategy (Rubin, 2008). Many experiential strategies, therefore, have been employed to improve student learning including (1) involving students in faculty research projects (Berger, 2002); (2) having students track an experimental research project being conducted by faculty in an agency setting (Wainstock, 1994); (3) inviting students to conduct secondary analysis of data sets (Forte, 1995; Wells, 2006); (4) requiring students to conduct research as part of their field experience (Moore & Avant, 2008); and (5) integrating research and practice content in one course (Berger, 2002). Though each approach integrates an experiential component, each does so in a limited way.

Forte (1995) posited that student discontent with research content may be the result of the failure in teaching modalities to integrate three distinct outcomes for MSW research courses: consumption, production, and integration. *Consumption* refers to the ability of social work students to read research articles and understand and critique the methods and findings. *Production* refers to the ability of students to conduct research. *Integration* refers to students' understanding of how research intersects with practice, human behavior, and policy. Demonstrating the usefulness of research to social work students through service learning projects is hypothesized as a potential method for providing a more integrated experiential strategy.

Service Learning in Teaching Research

Service learning is associated with many educational outcomes social work educators hope to achieve with their students (Keyton, 2001). The challenges students encounter in service learning provide opportunities to promote reflection, critical thinking (Lemieux & Allen, 2007), problem analysis skills, academic learning, personal and moral development, interpersonal and leadership skill, social responsibility, racial and cultural understanding, and commitment to service (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Because of the utility of connecting education to communities, service learning has been used by social work educators to teach students across the social work curriculum (Cohen, Hatchett, & Eastridge, 2006; Lucas, 2000; Williams & Reeves, 2004).

When implemented successfully, service learning achieves three outcomes: (1) student learning, (2) service to the community, and (3) collaboration between students, faculty, and community members (Eyler et al., 2001). Community-based research is a good strategy to build social work research infrastructure and support the research and evaluation needs of communities (Videka, Blackburn, & Moran, 2008), yet service learning rarely has been applied in teaching research (Wells, 2006). Service learning can challenge

students' skepticism of the utility of research because they will have a hands-on learning experience (Brzuzy, & Segal, 1996; Williams & Reeves, 2004). This paper presents (1) the development of a service learning model for teaching research and program and practice evaluation, (2) implementation of the model, (3) examples of student group projects, and (4) strengths and challenges of the approach.

SERVICE LEARNING MODEL

Faculty teaching in two MSW research courses, research methods and program and practice evaluation, collaborated to develop the following service learning model. The model was perceived to promote student learning of research and evaluation skills using three distinct learning strategies. First, students learned from instructors in a didactic teaching arrangement for half of each class. The instructor provided hands-on consultation on evaluation projects during the second half of each session. Students learned content on general research methods (e.g., formulating research questions, design, measurement, data collection) and program and practice evaluation (e.g., assessment models, types of evaluations, practice evaluation strategies) via a didactic learning method (instructor presentation of material, readings, class exercises). Second, via a collaborative group process, students learned from each other to propose, conduct, and complete joint community-based evaluation projects. Third, students learned from the community (e.g., administrators, practitioners, and clients) via evaluation projects conducted with agencies. When contacting agencies for proposed evaluation projects and data collection, the intent was to set all projects within the larger framework of service delivery system requirements for accountability (regulations, laws, and funding requirements) and practice realities (current state of knowledge of practice effectiveness). Below is a description of how the model was developed and implemented.

Model Development and Implementation

Developing the model involved an 11-step process before and during the class. Steps 1 to 5 occurred prior to the start of each session. Steps 6 to 10 occurred after the class began.

STEP 1: COURSE RESTRUCTURING

The research curriculum committee examined objectives across the existing courses and shifted them to reflect steps in the research process and appropriate sequencing that would be non-redundant. For example, there was content on data analysis in scientific methods in social work, taught in the fall semester, which was more appropriately placed in evaluation in

social work taught in the spring semester, when student groups would be analyzing data and writing a report.

STEP 2: FORCED REGISTRATION

This step involved keeping the student cohorts together with the same instructors to ensure group cohesion. This was generally a smooth administrative process; however, issues inevitably arose due to student attrition, conflicts with student schedules, and group conflicts. Faculty teaching in the research sequence adhered to a consistent approach with students requesting to move to a different section, approving changes only in extraordinary situations.

STEP 3: ASSIGNMENTS

Four interrelated assignments were developed that would be common to all sections of the course. They included (1) a comprehensive literature review, (2) an evaluation plan, (3) implementation of an evaluation, and (4) a written evaluation report for the agency. Individual assignments also were included to assess student learning of important research and evaluation content (e.g., article critiques, quizzes, exams, and practice evaluations using a single-system design). Class sessions were divided between instructor presentations and exercises on content (one-half class time) and group time to work on projects and for consultation with instructor (one-half class time). The group meeting and consultation time were essential both for providing direct supervision of projects and for keeping students on task managing all three assignments.

STEP 4: AGENCY PARTNERS

Instructors identified agencies in need of research and evaluation assistance, which proved to be easier than expected. More than 30 agencies expressed a desire to collaborate on student-based projects, and most identified multiple programs to evaluate. As implementation of the service learning model, student groups have conducted needs assessments, process evaluations, and outcome evaluations for agencies and programs as diverse as child welfare, Mental Illness Chemical Abuse (MICA) programs, family court, developmental disability agencies, residential treatment projects, school-based anti-bullying programs, and HIV/AIDS prevention programs, to name a few.

STEP 5: SCOPE OF WORK

Before the start of the fall semester, individual faculty members met with a contact person from each agency to discuss potential projects, the scope

of work, and the conditions for student projects/assignments. Formal agreements were reached with each program that detailed project deliverables.

STEP 6: GROUP FORMATION

Students were placed into working groups of four or five members. Individual instructors chose their own method. Some instructors chose random assignments; others allowed students to choose based on interest in the agency or population of clients served. Once in groups, students completed and signed a service learning contract (Appendix). During the first 2 to 3 weeks of class, the instructor consulted with each group to clearly define each project and assign initial tasks. At this stage of the semester, tasks focused on the groups getting to know the agencies and programs, the clients they served, what interventions were employed, and what the program hoped to achieve. Division of labor and clear role assignment within groups were critical to the success of the projects because of the complexity of the assignments.

STEP 7: IRB COLLABORATION

As most of the projects were part of a class assignment and not shared outside the agency, projects were exempted from the institutional review board (IRB) approval process. Nevertheless, all students completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative course to obtain a certificate demonstrating their understanding of the protection of human subjects and, in some cases, they completed an IRB proposal for unofficial review by IRB staff.

STEP 8: FINE TUNING

Instructors contacted agencies regarding the projects and fine-tuned the evaluation study design (especially related to measurement) to ensure the product of the evaluation would reflect the needs of agency.

STEP 9: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

These were smooth processes for most groups. The successful and timely completion of data collection depended on the level of coordination between students and the agency and on oversight from the instructor. Analyzing the data, however, required intense consultation from instructors. Agencies frequently requested descriptive data. Nevertheless, to demonstrate comprehensive learning, students were asked to plan bivariate and multivariate analyses.

STEP 10: EVALUATION REPORT

Generally, two versions of final reports were prepared by student groups: a technical and comprehensive version for the instructor and a more concise and less technical version for the agency. Students also were required to submit the following products to agencies: (1) a final report, (2) instruments used and codebook, (3) database developed, (4) methods for conducting the evaluation, (5) the evaluation plan, and (6) PowerPoint slides for oral presentation. In some instances, students presented findings for administrators and staff and, in other instances, an agency administrator came to the student's class for the presentation. Below are examples of how the model was implemented with two programs.

Sample Projects

GOALS, INTEGRITY, RESPECT, LEADERSHIP, AND SPORTS:
GIRLS SPORTS FOUNDATION

Finding agency partners sometimes can be serendipitous. Contact with the GIRLS Sports Foundation (GSF) was made through a colleague at the School of Social Work. The year-old GSF was making an appeal for volunteers at one of the student service club meetings. As part of the appeal, staff mentioned that they would be applying for grants to continue programming and to expand. The co-directors had anecdotal evidence about the impact they were having in the community but had no hard data. The instructor approached the leaders of the organization to see whether they would be interested in an evaluation of program outcomes. The evidence could be used to recruit participants and future appeals for funding support. The co-directors expressed interest, which began the negotiation on deliverables and timetables. Deliverables included all data, measurement instruments, and a report of findings. It was essential, however, to communicate to the community partners the limitations in project scope and that deliverables were subject to academic calendars (i.e., no final report for 8 months). It also was important to garner a commitment from the co-directors to support the students emotionally (deputizing the students in the eyes of the participants), logistically (granting access to the participants), and materially (photocopying of instruments, as students are not expected to spend their own funds).

Once an agreement was reached, students self-selected into the GSF evaluation group based upon interest generated by the program description. The stated mission of the GSF was to promote achievement, leadership, and respect through weekly mentoring and sports activity among underserved inner-city girls ages 4 to 18 (see Mead, 2008; Bryan, DelBalso, Fenn, & Giancarlo, 2007). During the fall semester, students applied their course knowledge by developing a research proposal and IRB application. Students

familiarized themselves with the organization through conversations with the GSF co-directors and attendance at some of the weekly mentoring/sports gatherings. (In the process, some of the student group members became interested in volunteering with the GSF, which continued through graduation the following year.) To develop outcome measures, students worked with the program directors to develop a self-administered questionnaire that operationalized the values and goals reflected in the GSFs mission statement. With IRB approval, the students administered a pretest questionnaire to parents of the participants at the beginning of the spring semester and a post-test 3 months later. The students then analyzed the data and submitted a final report to the GSF. Fortunately, the results were positive for the GSF, its participants, and the students (see Bryan et al., 2007; Mead, 2008). The instructor provided guidance to the student group throughout the process to ensure rigor, ethical standards, knowledge integration, and a polished final product. However, not all projects proceeded so smoothly, as the next case study will demonstrate.

WOMEN'S PREVENTION AND CARE INITIATIVE PROGRAM

Typically, agencies chose to participate in student-run evaluation projects for the various reasons, including (1) to help faculty members, (2) to provide student learning opportunities, or (3) to improve their program. Thus, agencies may have started projects with either clear expectations and objectives or ambiguous expectations and no objectives. Even worse, some agencies entered into projects with inflated expectations of what was possible for a student group to accomplish in two semesters. When approached by a faculty member, the director of the Women's Prevention and Care Initiative Program (WPCIP) program nevertheless demonstrated clear and manageable objectives for a student evaluation project.

The agency was in the process of working with their clients to address issues related to assessing of HIV/AIDS. A 25-session trauma-focused therapy program for women at risk of HIV infection had been developed to address the impact of trauma on increasing risk for HIV. The agency was struggling with two related issues: (1) how to identify women in need of this program and (2) how to recruit them. To answer these questions, the agency requested construction of an instrument to identify and recruit women from their existing program. The contract between the student group and the agency specified timetables for activities and deliverable products, which included a literature review, the research instrument, and a final report, including the outcomes.

As the project progressed, the student group assigned to the WPCIP experienced several challenges. The group members reported having difficulty communicating and meeting with their agency contact person, making it difficult to access needed information (i.e., program descriptions, goals, and objectives) and guidance from the agency. At the same time, the agency

was not satisfied with the process or comfortable with the items for the instrument drafted by the group. Lack of communication between the student group and the agency resulted in a stressful process for students and a product that did not meet the agency's expectations. The director was seeking an intake instrument that included "noninvasive" questions that would avoid re-traumatization for the women. The student group struggled in isolation with the task of formulating valid and noninvasive trauma questions, so they looked to existing measures, such as the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, for guidance. The agency, however, rejected questions generated by such existing measures for their "bluntness." Both sides became frustrated.

Social work faculty at the school where the service learning model was being implemented had been working on infusing trauma-informed perspectives into the curriculum. To be consistent with this effort, the instructor introduced a class session on trauma-informed "research." In the session, the instructor introduced the basic principles of "trauma-informed care," and the students were asked to brainstorm a list of practical tips for conducting trauma-informed research. Then, in a small group exercise, each group worked on creating two questions that could be used to identify women who may have experienced trauma. The questions were intended to be noninvasive and appropriate for the initial stage of engagement but still clear and focused enough to be able to identify women at high risk for HIV infection. Each student from the WPCIP evaluation group was assigned to a small group to lead the conversation. Based on this exercise, the WPCIP student group formulated items for the questionnaire that was used for data collection. Unfortunately, the group ran out of time and was not able to collect enough data to test the validity of the measure. However, the development of the screening instrument was a valuable product for the agency. The instructor and the agency came to an agreement to revisit this evaluation project with the next cohort of students and then to test the instrument for reliability and validity. A report was written and submitted to the agency (along with the proposal) including an extensive literature review, SPSS data file, and PowerPoint presentation slides of the oral presentation. This case example demonstrates the fact that the reality of service learning evaluation projects is that instructors are responsible for securing participating agencies, ensuring the quality of work, fulfillment of the contract between student groups and the agency, and providing good learning for students, and sometimes these goals are not as compatible or easy to achieve as expected at the outset.

Strengths of a Service Learning Approach

Service learning has considerable potential for promoting research competency and improving the experience for graduate social work students taking research-related courses. The case examples above illustrate the potential

contributions a service learning approach can make to both student learning and community service. The GIRLS Sports Foundation project demonstrated the value for agencies as they received data affirming program effectiveness to use for obtaining grant funding. The WPCIP program example showed the potential for learning research skills (developing a screening instrument) while considering a practice need (being sensitive to re-traumatization). This approach showed students the value of research and program evaluation when evaluating practice at both the micro-level (direct) and macro-level (administrative/community) of social work practice.

Similar learning opportunities presented themselves to students engaged in other evaluation projects. Across the board, students saw in real time how research can be used simultaneously to inform practice and programs. On a practical level, these service learning projects (1) reinforced the didactic material presented in class; (2) illustrated the realities of conducting community-based research; (3) demonstrated the purpose of IRBs and the ethical dilemmas that may arise in conducting research in practice settings; and (4) demonstrated the strengths and challenges of using evidence-based practices to guide their own work. It is expected that having a positive service learning experience may lead to students becoming more aware of the necessity of research and program evaluation in evaluating their own practice.

The projects themselves generally proved to be valuable for the agencies in which they were conducted. Agencies received evaluation data, a literature review, a database, methods, and instruments to conduct future evaluation. They also were provided a rare objective look at their program through the lens of the study and evaluation. By engaging agencies in research that supports their needs, as they define them, service learning projects may have the effect of lowering practitioner and agency resistance to using evidence-based practice and generate, as Rubin (2008) suggests, a win-win situation for agencies and social work programs.

Challenges of a Service Learning Approach

Though implementing the preceding service learning approach provided a number of advantages for students and agencies, it was not without its challenges. The approach was time-intensive, resulting in an increase in the workload for instructors and students. To adequately support students and to produce quality outcomes, instructors had to be intimately involved with every phase of each project. Close supervision of the projects at each stage was requisite for success. Students needed support and consultation for the technical aspects of conducting research (e.g., data collection and measurement) and the organizational realities of conducting research with agencies. Students were required to meet frequently as a group and to spend time at the agencies planning and conducting their evaluations. The group process

necessitated effective coordination at three levels. First, group communication was essential. Some groups experienced difficulty in assigning roles and sharing workload, which created stress for group members. Second, communication between students and agencies was consistently challenging. Although agencies had volunteered to participate, at times students had difficulty accessing information and receiving needed agency support. Occasionally, as we can see in the second illustration, the instructors were required to step in to facilitate communication between students and agencies. Third, although students owned the projects, instructors needed to be continually aware of group dynamics and the current status of all projects.

Learning research methods while *conducting* research created anxiety for many students. Specifically, agency expectations often were unreasonable at times; agencies frequently had difficulty identifying what they wanted; and agencies sometimes changed their priorities or decreased their level of interest in projects once they were under way. Group members sometimes ran into difficulty with the frontline staff or managers appointed by program directors to work with student groups. Such difficulties at times were greater than what students could handle, requiring an instructor's intervention. Faculty needed to "evaluate" and "manage" the sophistication and difficulty of evaluation projects, considering student ability and benefit to the agency. To work through challenges, the role of faculty is extremely important: Using their best judgment, faculty should be ready to improvise and retune the original evaluation plan to keeping projects and learning alive.

CONCLUSION

Despite some of the challenges, service learning seems to be well suited to teaching social work research and evaluation with tangible benefits for students, faculty, and communities. The method ties together student education and direct practice while providing a valuable community service. Service learning also promotes the desired competencies resulting from successful completion of courses in research: consumption, production, and integration (Forte, 1995). For social work faculty, a service learning model combines our three major roles: teaching, research, and service. The approach also promotes and strengthens university–community partnerships. To achieve optimal outcomes, we suggest the following: (1) Faculty workload should be negotiated to accommodate the greater time demands required for monitoring such projects; (2) class size should be limited so that the number of project groups is manageable; and (3) schools must provide continual support for the service learning model by listening to the needs of faculty, students, and agencies. In so doing, this new approach to teaching research and evaluation to social work students can be sustained for the mutual benefit of schools of social work, the profession, and the communities they serve.

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APPENDIX

SERVICE LEARNING CONTRACT

Student Names	Student E-mails
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	

Professor Name:	E-mail:
-----------------	---------

Site:	Site phone:
Contact Person:	Contact's e-mail
	Contact's phone:

(Indicate the designated student contact with an asterisk above)

Service learning utilizes an experiential approach to the integration of course content and community service to assist a student in developing civic responsibility, critical and creative thinking, and commitment to the values of the social work profession.

To that end this contract is designed to

1. assist the student and agency in understanding the learning objectives of the course;
2. clarify the activities in which the student will be involved at the agency in relation to the learning objectives; and
3. ensure that both the student and the agency are aware of their responsibilities as partners in the service learning project.

Course Learning Objectives applicable to this project are listed in the attached syllabi for SW510 Scientific Methods and SW 514–Evaluation in Social Work.

Agency Objectives and/or Activities: (Completed by agency rep w/ instructor and/or student)

1.
2.
3.
4.

FINAL AGREEMENTS

I agree to honor the minimum commitment of time and effort required for the service learning component of my class and any of the additional training and/or time requirements of my service learning site as detailed by the course syllabus and the agency/school representative. I agree to furnish the following deliverables at the completion of the evaluation project: evaluation plan, data collection instrument(s), data, and final report. I also agree to contact my professor should I have any concerns about my service learning project.

Student1 Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Student2 Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Student3 Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Student4 Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Student5 Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Student6 Signature: _____ Date: _____

I agree to provide adequate access to people and resources for the service learning students to plan and implement the evaluation Our agency will help [recruit the study sample, provide interview space, provide photocopying for surveys, provide secure storage space, and/or provide access to personnel, clients, and/or contacts as needed]. We will encourage participation by [posting flyers, weekly announcements, and/or mailing a letter of introduction to potential participants]. I agree to complete necessary service learning forms by due dates (e.g., letter acknowledging receipt of deliverables). I also agree to contact the professor should I have any concerns about the service learning project or students.

Agency Signature: _____ Date: _____
 Approved by: _____
 Professor's Initials