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Community Projects in a Senior Capstone Course

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Abstract

Working in groups, students in a senior-level capstone class completed service learning projects addressing specific needs of community agencies. Students were generally positive about the extent to which course objectives were met and assignments were valuable for their learning. Students were also generally positive about the value of service learning, indicating that the class helped them become more interested in solving community problems and that they gained a better understanding and appreciation of civic engagement.

Introduction

Research on service learning has demonstrated positive impacts on both students and community agencies. Not only do students who participate in service learning better learn course objectives (Knapp & Stubblefield, 2000; Valerius & Hamilton, 2001), but students also report an improved sense of social responsibility, increased sense of the meaningfulness of college, and an increased likelihood of choosing a service-related occupation (Primavera, 1999; Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, & DuBois, 2005; Roschelle, Turpin, & Elias, 2000). In addition, some studies show long-term impacts of service learning, including better grades, a more integrated identity, openness to experiences, and more complexity when thinking about themselves and their relationships with others (Jones & Abes, 2004; Strage, 2004). Similarly, interacting with clients and staff that come from a marginalized group (e.g., HIV infected) may make students re-examine their own stereotypes and preconceived notions of what individuals from certain marginalized groups are like and how they should be treated as well as improve students' interpersonal skills (e.g., conflict resolution, communication) and their own sense of self-efficacy (Aberle-Grasse, 2000; Jones & Abes, 2003; Knapp & Stublefield; Tucker & McCarthy, 2001).

Students are not the only ones who benefit from the service learning experience.
For example, when undergraduates as part of their service learning tutored elementary school students, the students' math ability increased over the course of the project (Pezdek, 2002). Agency personnel as well as their clients tend to overwhelmingly report the positive impacts that undergraduate service learning students have at their agencies (Vernon & Foster, 2002). This is in part because agency personnel value the knowledge that students bring (Roschelle et al., 2000) and often report that student service learning projects provide significant contributions to their agencies (Reeb, Sammon, & Isackson, 1999).

There are many options for bringing service learning into the classroom. One popular option is to create a stand-alone service module or laboratory, where students complete a certain number of service hours in addition to their regular coursework (Enos & Troppe, 1996). This is a relatively hands off approach for faculty who just want to get their feet wet with the service learning experience. However, students also report fewer benefits from this type of course experience because they have little opportunity to integrate their experience with classroom learning. Another option is to offer a course that solely centers on service learning (Enos & Troppe). These courses allow a more integrated service approach where students complete a certain number of

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service hours, but also spend a significant amount of time in the classroom reflecting on their experience. One drawback with this kind of experience is that, without carefully designed reflection assignments, students are not likely to connect their service experience to their discipline and thus may not make connections between their service experience and career options in their field of study. A third option is leadership-oriented service courses (Enos & Troppe). These courses are a bit more directed toward career goals, but still lack the focus of major-specific service and thus students may learn to be better leaders, but may not be able to connect that to their discipline. Service learning can also be integrated into specific discipline-centered courses as a minor or major portion of course requirements (Enos & Troppe). This is a good way to introduce service learning to students, but unless faculty utilize classroom activities and reflection, the connection between the service experience and classroom objectives may be lost. In addition, although students may learn to connect service experience to that specific class, they may not be able to connect it to career options within their major in general. Finally, whenever service learning involves working for a set number of hours without a specific focus or goal in mind, students may end up spending their time as 'gophers' for their chosen agency, not participating in a truly meaningful experience.

Our goal was to circumvent the issues mentioned above by having students complete a service learning project as part of a disciplinary capstone course. The idea was for students to integrate knowledge from all of the courses in their discipline in a cumulative fashion and demonstrate this integrated knowledge by completing a community project. This would allow us to ensure that students were not merely completing a required number of service hours that may not give them the opportunity to utilize their discipline-specific skills, and also ensure that projects were not too specific to one area of their discipline. Furthermore, this was a fully-integrated course in which all course assignments centered around the service learning project. This would ensure that students made the connection between their service learning experience and discipline-related knowledge.

With this paper, we summarize how service-learning assignments were used to meet the goals of a capstone course for psychology majors. As taught for over ten years, this course was designed to "bring it all together," to not only provide students with perspectives for integrating across different content areas of psychology but also to make connections with the "real world." For our students, we defined the "real world" as the set of different worlds students were likely to encounter following graduation. Through most years in which this course was taught, service-learning was not used. Service learning was introduced as an integrated course requirement two years ago, first as a requirement for completing a specific number of service hours at a community agency and then, later, as a requirement for completing community-based projects. We found the latter to be more successful. Hence, the present paper will focus on the value of community-based projects within capstone courses.

The Community-Based Projects
For their service-learning requirement, students worked in groups to complete a project that was both useful to a community agency and used their knowledge and skills as psychology majors. This requirement provided the organizational framework for class sessions and other class assignments throughout the semester.

At the beginning of the semester, the class was divided into groups of 5-6 students each. Group assignments followed an in-class exercise that started with students indicating their most preferred agencies and projects (top three); negotiations followed that yielded a relatively even distribution of students across potential projects. If at least three students were not available for a specific project, it was dropped. When

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service learning was first integrated into the course (with a specific number of service hours to be completed), groups consisted of students who worked at the same agency. With the change to community-based projects, each group of students worked together to complete a project for their assigned agency.

The agencies and projects selected for the class shared the theme of social exclusion – that is, at least a significant portion of the clients served by the agencies were likely to have experienced some social exclusion (e.g., HIV/AIDS victims, individuals living in poverty, victims of domestic violence, ethnic minorities). Obviously, different instructors could use different criteria or emphasize different themes in their selection of potential community agencies and/or community projects. We found it beneficial to have a theme that could connect projects and agencies that were otherwise quite different. As will be discussed later, the common theme of social exclusion provided an illustrative example for how different areas of psychology could be integrated to address broad social problems.

In addition to fitting the common theme of social exclusion, community agencies were selected based on their interest and willingness to work with students in designing projects that could be mutually beneficial. Student projects were better "fits" for some agencies than for others. We found it imperative to meet individually with agency directors to discuss course requirements as well as specific examples of the kinds of projects that students could complete for them. Most agency directors were accustomed to working with students completing a specific number of direct-service hours. They were less accustomed to the idea of students using their knowledge and skills to complete a project that could be beneficial to the agency. Yet, most agency directors were quite excited about using volunteer help in different ways than they had been accustomed.

In making prior arrangements, we stressed that agency directors did NOT need to design specific projects for students. Rather, it was important that they could envision benefiting from the types of group projects that students might propose. However, when we first integrated community projects into the capstone course, we found that many agency directors developed specific ideas for projects about which they were particularly excited. Hence, we have started to offer students different types of options. For some agencies, students were told that directors did not have a specific project in mind; the group would develop proposals. For other agencies, a specific project was presented for students to complete (although students were still involved in developing a more detailed proposal for agency approval). For example, in one case, students opted for completing an evaluation of the effectiveness of an after-school recreation program. This flexibility worked well for students; some wanted flexibility and others wanted more specific direction (i.e., more explicit directions about what was expected of them).

Once groups were assigned at the beginning of the semester, students completed a minimum of seven hours familiarizing themselves with the community agencies to which they had been assigned. Most students completed an orientation and 5-6 hours of direct service for the agency. However, agencies could design 7 hours for students that reflected whatever combination of activities they felt best prepared students for designing meaningful projects. Students attended community events or conferences, read publications or grant proposals produced by the agency, or completed yet other activities deemed appropriate by agency directors. After students completed 7 hours of

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"familiarization," each group was required to meet with representatives of the community agency to negotiate and agree upon a community project that met the following criteria:

- o The project must be useful to the agency; it must be something that, in fact, would be used.
- o The project must require that students incorporate findings from psychology research (both basic and applied or community-based).

In addressing the second criterion, students were asked to consider whether their project required skills and knowledge associated with a psychology background. Was the project something that psychology majors could do better or differently than students with other backgrounds? Students were provided with diverse examples of potential community projects that included preparing and presenting a report to legislators (e.g., advocating for policies or funding beneficial to an agency), completing a needs assessment or program evaluation for the agency, preparing a brochure or manual for volunteers (e.g., that would give volunteers a better appreciation of the value of their work, based on psychological research findings), or developing workshops for agency staff or for individuals served by the agency. Students were expected to complete a proposal that included summaries of relevant psychological theories and research as well as a specific time-line for completing different components of the project (consistent with class deadlines for completing the project in one semester).

Upon completing the projects, each student group prepared a poster presentation that summarized the steps and outcomes of the project as well as specific ways in which academic psychology was used to address a community need. Following the first semester in which such community projects were integrated into the capstone course, the instructor worked with the Director of Service Learning to initiate a special exhibit in the student union building at the end of the semester. That display, entitled "Civic Engagement in Action," included posters from different classes on campus and provided students with a special opportunity for displaying and discussing the relevance of their work (and discipline) with others. This university event will be continued into future years.

Course Objectives
Students met in regular class sessions throughout the semester, although many class sessions were canceled to provide students with opportunities for group meetings. Topics for class sessions as well as additional class assignments were connected to activities involved in completing community-based projects. In this way, the project assignment was an important tool for both meeting different course objectives and integrating diverse assignments. Basically, everything students did in the class was connected to their work with community agencies. Specific course objectives are discussed below in the context of how they were facilitated by the assignment for community-based projects.

Course Objective #1: Students will gain experiences in bridging the gap between psychology (theory and research) from the academic realm and community applications, between academic psychology and the "real world." Of course, the completion of the community-based project, as summarized above, reflected the primary vehicle for meeting this goal. The community agencies for which projects were completed shaped the topic areas for other assignments.

Writing for the real world. For paper assignments, students were encouraged to think both about the needs of their community agencies and about using psychology in the public interest. Class sessions focused on the long history (within psychology) of sharing research findings with the

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public. For example, students examined George Miller's (1969) description of "giving psychology away in the public interest" in his Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association in 1969. In addition to proposals and reports for their community-based projects, students wrote additional papers relevant for their assigned community agencies. Student papers, individually written, addressed how specific theories and research findings could be used in the public interest as well as how research-based approaches from psychology could be helpful in analyses of local well-being data (e.g., poverty rates, high school graduation rates). For one assignment simply entitled "Giving Psychology Away," each student selected a research article (reflecting basic research) that s/he thought would be relevant and important for staff members at their assigned community agency. Students' summaries of important research findings were expected to include clear examples of how the findings could be used in the public interest (e.g., in helping parents, in developing specific programs, in advocating for specific legislative policies). For another paper assignment, also focused on "giving psychology away," each student selected descriptive data from internet sources that were relevant to understanding the well-being of individuals or groups served by their assigned community agency. Analyzed in terms of relevant information (research findings, accepted theories) from psychology, students summarized data and/or trends in a specific area relevant to their agency (e.g., prenatal care, high-school graduation rates). Students were also asked to include recommendations for future programs and/or policies based on their analyses. In different classes, we have varied the number and types of specific writing assignments. Whatever the specific assignments that instructors select, community-based projects provide a meaningful tool for connecting assignments to the general themes of "writing for the real world" and "giving the discipline away."

Portfolio and interview tasks. As a capstone class for majors, the assignment for community projects was described in terms of preparing students for transitioning to other "worlds" (e.g., graduate school or employment). In this same context, other class activities were designed to help students with materials and skills relevant to this transition. As psychology majors, our students had completed a portfolio that included a resume, a personal statement, and writing samples as an assignment for an introductory course (Introduction to the Psychology Major); these portfolios are retained by the Psychology Student Support Program (a department program that includes both advising and other types of student support). For the capstone class, these portfolios are returned to students for updating and improvement. Students' experiences in designing projects and writing about community needs – associated with their community-based projects – gave them fresh perspectives from which to evaluate their portfolios. In addition, other class activities were designed to show students to how specific civic competencies and skills relevant to service learning would be viewed positively by future employers and/or graduate schools. Students also completed an interview-taping assignment (at the university career center); students could select a job interview or graduate-school interview option, depending on their interests and future plans.

Group collaboration. Much of the work that students completed for their community-based projects required group collaboration. Based on reflections on the successes and failures of group work in college classes, students were encouraged to think about their bridges to the "real world" in the context of designing guidelines for group work consistent with specific employment settings. Student groups were asked to develop and implement guidelines for group work (for class assignments) consistent with requirements for "team work" in work settings.

Course Objective #2: Students will gain experiences in integrating materials and information that they have previously learning in different courses in different areas of psychology. Toward this goal, the course maintains breadth of perspective (across different domains of psychology) and avoids in-depth study of specialized areas. As mentioned earlier, a common integrative theme for community-based projects can be beneficial. For our class, the common integrative theme of social exclusion ran through class presentations, films, assignments and other class activities (e.g., reflections). The theme was selected for its inclusiveness, making it useful for integrating across different areas of psychology.

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Community-based projects facilitated this integrative goal in other ways as well. For example, each student group prepared a symposium focused on the relevance of research-based approaches to addressing problems, challenges, issues, and policies relevant to the community agency to which they were assigned. Guidelines for the symposia presentations emphasized the importance of integrative approaches that included research examples from diverse areas of psychology.

Course Objective #3: Students will gain experiences in critical thinking about contemporary issues in psychology, in evaluating the quality of arguments supporting conflicting claims about controversial issues in psychology. As for other objectives, this objective was integrated with themes and issues related to service learning. For example, students completed class debates that addressed controversial issues relevant to the work of the community agencies at which they were completing projects. The focus was on different controversial issues in psychology that could influence perceptions of community agencies (like the ones at which projects were being completed) – e.g., perceptions about the population being served, the value of specific programs, policy issues relevant to the agency. During class debates, the focus was on how different positions (on the debate topic) could have different implications relevant to the work of the community agencies – for example, how one's position regarding the best definition of human intelligence and/or the heritability of intelligence could influence opinions about the value of HeadStart programs and/or funding. In the context of their community-based projects, reflection assignments were also designed to elicit critical thinking and reflection about problems and issues from different areas of psychology.

Course Objective #4: Students will gain experiences in oral and written communication. As summarized in earlier sections, different course goals and assignments required oral communication, oral presentation, and written communication; community-based projects provided the vehicle for integrating these different requirements.

Course Objective #5: Students will gain specific experiences relevant to supporting their understanding and appreciation of civic engagement. Diverse activities and assignments are integrated with and/or organized around each student's involvement in civic engagement through direct-service hours and community-based projects. As discussed earlier, most of the students' time and activities were devoted to civic engagement (e.g., through writing papers that could be used in the public interest, through completion of specific projects for community agencies). Reflection assignments were designed to encourage students to think about the diverse ways in which psychology could be used in becoming civically engaged.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

Of course, one important source of evidence that community-based projects were effective in facilitating course objectives came from the kinds of projects that students completed. For example, one group worked with a community agency dedicated to the resettlement of refugees. Based on both a review of relevant research findings and individual interviews that students conducted with members of different refugee groups, the group designed a brochure and information packet for volunteers that focused on the need to understand, appreciate, and respect the different cultural belief systems and values that volunteers would likely encounter. This and other community projects contained evidence that students had effectively bridged the gap between academic psychology (research and theory) and community applications (see Course Objective #1). Similarly, the final poster presentation, "Civic Engagement in Action," provided evidence of academic-community connections compelling to attendees from both the university and surrounding communities. In general, community agencies provided very positive feedback in their evaluations of the usefulness of the completed projects.

In addition, quantitative assessments provided evidence of effectiveness. Toward the end of the semester in which community-based projects were first integrated into the capstone class, students completed three different assessments. First, routine student evaluations – common to all department and college courses – were administered. Second, assessments specific to service learning (common to all campus service-learning classes) were administered. Third, students

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indicated their level of agreement with several statements designed to assess their attitudes about social issues relevant to the work of community agencies at which they served. Evaluations were obtained from 45 students enrolled in two sections of the course taught in the same semester. For most items in each of the three instruments, responses reflected the level of agreement with a specific statement; responses could vary from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

As seen in Table 1, students were generally positive about the extent to which course objectives were met and assignments were valuable for their learning. They were also generally positive about the value of service learning (for this class, their community-based projects). For example, positive responses to the statement that the class helped students become more interested in helping solve community problems (with a mean of 3.18) indicate that students gained "experiences relevant to supporting their understanding and appreciation of civic engagement" (Course Objective #5). There was further evidence that this was particularly true for students with little prior experience with community service. That is, students with little experience (less agreement that "Before this class I participated in community service regularly [at least twice a month]."), were reliably more likely to agree that the class increased their interest in helping to solve community problems. The relevant correlation equaled -.37 with an associated p value less than .05. See issue website http://rapidintellect.com/ AEQweb/sum2006.htm

Not surprisingly, despite the overall success of the community projects, there was wide variability in the extent of practical problems experienced by different student groups. Some groups were fraught with difficulties associated with communicating with understaffed and chaotic agencies; others were plagued by difficulties with interpersonal interactions within groups. Other analyses suggested that, the better the student's experience with service learning (community projects), the better the overall rating for the capstone course. The second column in Table 1 includes correlations between specific assessments of service learning and students' overall rating. In each case, the correlation was reliable.

Barriers to Success
Other analyses were designed to explore specific student attitudes that might be associated with perceptions of course effectiveness. As service learning was incorporated into this capstone course for majors, student comments (in both class discussions and written work) sometimes indicated resistance to the political ideology implicated by service learning. For example, some students complained that service learning, like other social programs, decreased personal or individual responsibility. In this way, students perceived that their service learning was vulnerable to the same criticism as the agencies at which the service-learning took place. That is, the service learning, like social/support programs offered by agencies, was harmful to individuals because it decreased their sense of personal responsibility (individuals taking care of their own problems). Based on these observations, we included several statements designed to assess social attitudes in the evaluations students completed at the end of the semester.

There was evidence suggesting that student attitudes could serve as barriers to effective community projects and to meeting course goals. For example, the more that students agreed that service learning could be harmful in decreasing personal responsibility, the poorer their overall rating for the course; the value of the relevant correlation was -.44, with a corresponding p value less than .01. Table 2 includes correlations between general measures of effectiveness for the course and for service learning. As seen in that table, there were reliable negative correlations suggesting that students who perceived the least effectiveness were those who agreed with the statement about decreased personal responsibility or agreed with a statement that high social or economic position reflects special individual abilities or accomplishments. Agreement with the statement about decreased personal responsibility was also reliably correlated with extent of agreement with other evaluative statements about service learning. Students who agreed that service learning could be harmful (in decreasing personal responsibility) were less likely to agree that service-learning helped them learn about group dynamics and group skills, r (39) = -.34, p < .05, that service-learning fostered personal insights and growth, r (37) = -.45, p < .01, and less likely to agree that their service activities made them more interested in attending class, r (39) = -.38, p < .05. The values for the three relevant correlations were -.34 (with a p value less than

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.05), -.45 (p value less than .01), and -.38 (p value less than .05), respectively. See issue website http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/sum2006.htm

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to have students complete a service learning project as part of a disciplinary capstone course in an effort to fully maximize the service learning experience as a connection between the knowledge learned throughout students' major courses and its application to the community. Similar to previous studies which found that students who participate in service learning better learn course objectives, students in our course generally agreed that course objectives were met and that assignments were valuable to their learning experience. In addition, our students indicated that they were more interested in solving community problems after having taken our service learning course, especially those who had little to no prior experience with service learning or community service in general. Finally, our students reported that the better their experience with service learning, the higher the overall rating of the course. This is not surprising as satisfaction with the service learning experience and classroom reflection activities are the greatest predictors of positive outcomes for service learning (Sek-Yum & Ngan-Pun, 2005).

Previous research on service learning courses has found a connection between service learning and social responsibility (Primavera, 1999; Reeb et al., 1999; Reed et al., 2005; Roschelle et al., 2000). Most research has suggested that the service learning experience increases students' sense of responsibility. Consistent with these findings, we found that student reports of positive experiences with service learning (e.g., that it fostered personal insights and growth, that they would recommend service-learning to other students) were reliably correlated with positive views about social responsibility (e.g., disagreement that service-learning decreases personal responsibility). An alternative interpretation is that negative opinions about social responsibility interfered with students' actual or perceived success with the service-learning experience. From this perspective, instructors should recognize that attitudes and opinions that students bring to their courses may serve as barriers to the success of some service-learning projects or assignments. For our course, those students who expressed these negative opinions of social responsibility also tended to report fewer positive impacts of service learning on their group skills and personal growth. This suggests that instructors need to give special attention to ways of encouraging students to leave their personal and/or political beliefs behind in focusing on research-based approaches to addressing community needs.

In conclusion, our findings indicated that students expressed the same type of benefits from the fully integrated capstone course as has been reported by other authors. However, our experiences and findings reinforced the ways in which community projects could be particularly effective in providing students with new insights into the ways in which their discipline-specific knowledge was relevant to civic engagement. Even for the small group of students who appeared to challenge the value of service learning (e.g., in decreasing personal responsibility), it was likely that their service-learning experiences led to greater reflection about issues of social responsibility and civic engagement. Finally, however, it should be noted that one limitation of our course was that it was conducted over the course of a single semester, which did not allow us to track how service learning impacted students over the long term. In addition, only one group of students in one discipline was examined. Future studies

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should examine the impact of service learning on the capstone experience in other disciplines.

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