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Solving Social Problems: Service Learning in a Core Curriculum Course

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Institutions of higher education are increasingly encouraged to incorporate High Impact Practices into the curriculum (AAC&U, 2012). One high impact practice included is Service-learning. Service-learning is an educational pedagogy that provides students with an opportunity to gain real-life experience outside of class and apply this to what they are discussing and learning about in the classroom. As institutions of higher education possibly evolve their mission statements to include civic service and experience, Service-learning may become an increasingly standard learning technique. At the University where this project takes place, the mission statement evolved in 2014 to include the values of "Engagement - promoting active involvement, intellectual inquiry and creativity, collaboration and community involvement" and "Service - giving of oneself to enhance the life and richness of the university and all of its members, as well as the larger community" (State of the University Address, August 2014; University Mission Statement, 2014). This paper details a Service-learning project in an Introduction to Social Problems course at an open access, public university with almost 16,000 students across five campuses in the North Georgia region. The course is offered every semester, with an enrollment of 32 students per semester. The students are in their first or second year, and have diverse majors. This paper outlines the project, discusses the benefits and challenges of incorporating this particular high impact practice in an introductory level course and illustrates the inclusion of L. Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning (Fink, 2003).

Service Learning in an Introductory Level Course

Service-learning is sometimes referred to as Experiential Learning, Civic Engagement and/or Field Based Learning (AAC&U, 2012). It is an opportunity to connect class information to real-life experiences, and relate these experiences to the formal curriculum presented in class. According to the National Service-learning Clearinghouse, it is "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, n.d.). In addition, academic Service-learning is a course-based, credit bearing education experience in which students participate in an activity that meets a community need and the student then reflects on the service activity in order to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995). According to the AAC&U, service-learning gives students direct experience with issues they are studying. It gives students an opportunity to apply what they are learning in class in a real-world setting. It also provides an opportunity to reflect in a classroom setting on their service. And, ultimately, the hope is to prepare students

for citizenship, work and life through working with a community partner (AAC&U, 2012).

In addition, having a strong foundational framework within the course for service-learning contributes to a structured learning design. For this purpose, I incorporated L. Dee Fink's "Taxonomy of Significant Learning" (Fink, 2003) and based the Course Objectives around these. Each of these objectives is addressed directly or indirectly though the service-learning assignment.
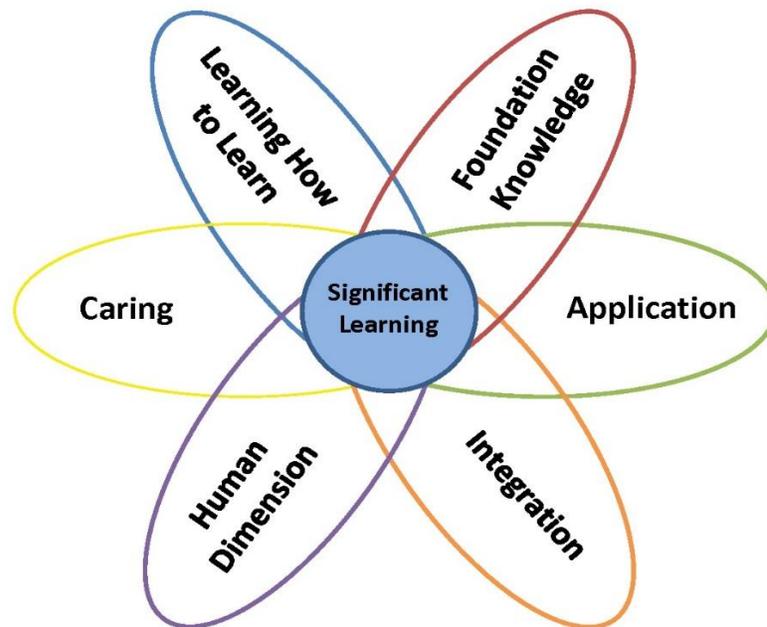
L. Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning

According to Fink, Foundational Knowledge is the ability to understand and remember. Application is problem solving and decision making. Integration is the ability to identify similarities/interactions between issues (interdisciplinary). The Human Dimension is the ability to learn something about oneself and how to interact with others in life. Caring occurs when a student changes his/her feelings, interests and/or values. Learning How to Learn is the ability to help students learn how to keep on learning after the course is over (Fink, 2007).

In my class I incorporate Fink's taxonomy in my 7 Course Objectives in the following ways:
- Define what a social problem is (Foundational Knowledge)
- Describe the concepts and major theoretical perspectives used by sociologists to view contemporary U.S. and global social problems (Foundational Knowledge)

- Illustrate, through the service learning assignment, the relationship between social problems and the larger social and global context within which they occur (<u>Integration/Application</u>)
- Demonstrate an understanding of the variety of ways social problems are interpreted in the U.S. and globally (<u>Integration/Human Dimension</u>)
- Demonstrate an understanding of how individual experience relates to the ways social problems and their solutions are viewed around the world (<u>Human Dimension</u>)
- Demonstrate orally and in writing, critical thinking skills for examining social problems (<u>Application</u>)
- Interact more effectively with others and learn something important about themselves and others through the service learning assignment (<u>Human Dimension/Caring</u>)

Using L. Dee Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning provides additional opportunities for the incorporation of High Impact Practices in the classroom. In my classroom, the Taxonomy is applicable because students "experience" the classroom materials through the service learning assignment. For example, students engage in "problem solving and decision making" (Application) when they are engaging in their service (Fink, 2007. p. 13). Students experience how to "interact with others in life" (Human Dimension), when they are working with other people at their place of service (Fink, 2007. p. 13). In addition, students sometimes "change their feelings, interests, or values" (Caring) when they are involved in or finish their service (Fink, 2007. p. 14). All of these contribute to the High Impact Practice of service-learning utilized in the Social Problems course.

In my class, students are expected to perform 15 hours of service at an agency of their choice. Students choose a variety of locations, some of which have included the Boys and Girls Club, Project Safe (a battered women's and children's shelter), Goodwill, Salvation Army, Habitat Re-Store, The Sparrows Nest (a homeless shelter), and the Northeast Georgia Food Bank, just to name a few. In addition, some students have chosen to be mentors at the local schools or county parks and recreation departments. I allow students to select their own agency for a variety of reasons. First, students have other responsibilities, so I wanted to provide as much flexibility, both for time and location, as possible. Second, students are able to select an agency based on their interests, which makes their service more meaningful. Third, their choices often relate to other courses or their major, which enhances the learning experience across disciplines. Lastly, if students have engaged in some type of service in the past, they occasionally choose to return to the agency they are familiar with or with which they have a relationship.

At the University, there is a website devoted to service-learning that details what service-learning is as well as outlines and provides community partnerships and resources. This is where students begin their project within the first 2 weeks of the semester. Students provide me with the location of their service, the name of their supervisor at the agency and contact information. The project is then organized into three specific sections and the semester is divided accordingly. This scaffolding allows students an opportunity to focus on one section of the project at a time, and enables us to have an in-depth discussion of their work at least 3 times during the semester. In addition, it provides greater manageability for me.

At the end of the first third of the semester (generally about 6 weeks into the semester), students are expected to complete 5 hours of service and turn in the first section of their paper (which I read, critique and return to them for revisions if necessary). This section of the paper outlines the social problem. Students are required to research the social problem by reading the relevant chapter in their textbook and utilizing outside academic sources. Students provide information and statistics on the social problem both for the United States and one other nation. This section of the paper addresses the following questions:

- What is the social problem you are addressing and how does it manifest itself in the U.S. and globally?
- How does it affect societies locally/globally?
- Why should we be concerned with this social problem in the U.S. and the nation you have chosen?
- How long has this issue been considered a social problem?
- Why is there a need for the organization addressing the social problem?

In addition, the day students turn in this part of the paper, they are expected to discuss the social problem in class. I facilitate the general discussion with probing open-ended questions. I begin by asking the students to describe their topic (the social problem they are researching), and then discuss the questions above. I also comment that if all 32 students completed 5 hours of service, the class (as a whole) has completed a minimum of 160 hours of service in the community. The students are always impressed. Then, the discussions primarily focus on the research the students have completed. We bring the discussions back to the textbook and how their research relates to class materials. The discussion provides an opportunity for students to talk in class without the fear of a right-or-wrong answer.

At the end of the second third of the semester (generally about 10 weeks into the semester), students are expected to complete an additional 5 hours of service and turn in the second section of the paper (which I read, critique and

return to them for revisions if necessary). This section of the paper describes the agency with which they are working (history of the agency, purpose of the agency, how the organization receives funding). Students are expected to research the information about the agency and this can include interviews with agency employees. The day they turn in this part of the paper, students are expected to discuss the following questions I ask in class:

- In your opinion, how effective is the agency in reaching its goal/s?
- Recommendations as to how the agency could improve addressing the social problem?
- What is agency doing that is good?
- How does your agency compare with equivalent agencies in the nation you discussed in Section I?

At the end of the semester, students finish their last 5 hours of service and turn in the completed project. The completed project includes documentation of all 15 hours of service; a letter from their supervisor that must be written on company letterhead indicating they actually did the work they said they did; and the entire paper, which includes the last section of the paper focusing on their experiences. Although I do not stipulate a required length for the paper, I do state the paper must be a minimum of 5 pages (typed, 10/12 point font, double-spaced). The papers, though, are generally a minimum of 10 pages. I have found that once students begin researching their topics, they find a lot of information to include, and they are excited about including it. The third section of the paper also tends to be longer because students enjoy sharing their personal experiences.

The third section of the paper provides the students with an opportunity to describe in detail their personal experiences, and on the day the project is due, students discuss these service experiences. Within the body of the paper, some of the questions addressed include:

- What was your reaction to working with people who may differ from you in race/ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, health, etc.?
- What did you learn that was new?
- What did you learn about yourself?
- Has your thinking about this social problem been changed since you performed this work? How?
- What will you take away from this experience that will endure long after this class is over?
- Did this experience relate to things we learned in class? If so, how? If not, how?
- In your opinion, what could be done on a micro-level to solve/eliminate this social problem?

- In your opinion, what could be done on a macro-level (including global solutions) to solve/eliminate this social problem?

Scaffolding the project into thirds is beneficial in a number of ways for both the students and me. As stated earlier, it makes the project more manageable. Students are able to conceptualize the assignment as 3 sections and focus on each section during a specific period of time. In addition, I am able to review each section of their papers to determine if they are successfully completing each stage of the project. The students are encouraged to revise each section based on my feedback of their work. When they turn in the completed project, the paper should not need any further revisions. Second, it provides opportunities for student reflection. Students are able to think about and discuss each section of the project. They focus on the specific social problem within the first third of the semester, the agency in the middle of the semester, and their experiences at the end of the semester. Lastly, it provides 3 different opportunities for student discussion in class and enables them to further relate what they are doing outside of class with what we are discussing in class.

Benefits

There are a number of benefits of incorporating service-learning into the classroom including personal, social and academic outcomes. Generally, service-learning provides students with an awareness of their role in society (Dukhan & Schumack, 2010). Service-learning enhances socialization, citizenship, self-esteem, and attitudes toward diverse communities (Henderson & Brookhart, 1997; Thornton & Jaeger, 2007). It enhances student's cumulative learning (AAC&U, 2012). Among other high impact practices, according to the AAC&U, service-learning is beneficial for college students from many backgrounds, especially historically underserved students, who often do not have equitable access to high-impact learning (AAC&U, 2012; Kuh et al., 2007). According to the AAC&U, service-learning allows students to give something back to the community. It is an important college outcome, and for students, working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life (National Service-learning Clearing House, n.d.; AAC&U, 2012; Thornton & Jaeger, 2007; Smith & McKitrick, 2009). According to the AAC&U, many employers feel that college graduates are falling short in their preparedness in several areas-including ones employers deem most important for workplace success (AAC&U, 2015). Service-learning (among other "high-impact" educational practices) can build these skills and further prepare them for work and life.

In an introductory level course, service-learning may become part of their "first year experience" and possibly enhance retention (Gonyea et al., 2008;

Gallini & Moely, 2003; Keup, 2005-2006; Hatcher, Bringle & Muthiah, 2005). Research suggests that high-impact practices such as service-learning increase the first-year student's probability of returning for a second year, particularly for African American students (Kuh, 2008; Kuh, et al., 2008). If students feel connected to their course, college and community, they may be more likely to continue on their path of higher education (Perkey, 2011). Not only does service learning increase retention, but students who participate in service learning consistently persist at a higher rate in college than those who do not; there is a positive impact on student performance (Brownell and Swaner, 2009). Student persisters at two-year institutions are more likely to work collaboratively with other students, put more time in their studies, do more challenging academic work, interact more with faculty and have more positive ratings of campus environment (McClenney and Marti, 2006). In addition, first year students reported greater gains in learning such as integrating ideas and diverse perspectives, discussing ideas with faculty, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, applying theories, judging the value of information as one's own and trying to understand others' perspectives (Brownell and Swaner, 2009).

In my Introduction to Social Problems course, the benefits of service-learning are multiple and varied, and go beyond the benefits previously listed. First, in a Social Problems course, everything we are discussing "in-class" is simultaneously occurring "outside class" in the real world. So, providing students with an opportunity to experience, apply knowledge and share/discuss enhances their learning and the course. It enables them to further apply class learning to real-world situations (Brownell and Swaner, 2009). Second, students gain a deeper understanding of the issue they are studying and have opportunities to reflect, challenge and question issues in their community. Through our class discussions, students have a higher rate of interactions with other students and me, which leads to an increase in critical thinking, a greater appreciation of diversity and a higher level of engagement (Brownell and Swaner, 2009). Students who are engaging in these deep learning activities perceive greater educational and personal gains from college, perceive their campus to be more supportive and tend to be more satisfied overall with college (NSSE, 2004). Third, students often learn and experience "latent" consequences. For example, students interested in a career in K-12 education may engage in a mentoring program only to discover they do not want to work with a particular population. This not only saves a student time, but also money. Often, students have their future plans affirmed through their experiences or they discover they may want to take an entirely different career path. In addition, I have had students obtain paying jobs with the agency they worked with once the service-learning project had been completed.

On a practical note, service-learning makes the course more interesting. As students share their thoughts about their issue, agency and experiences, it

allows me to further elaborate on topics we have discussed in class and provide information that may not normally be discussed in an introductory level course. At least three times during the semester, students are given specific times to talk about their experiences. These are opportunities for student engagement as they share their impressions, experiences, and thoughts in a non-threatening environment. With this assignment, there are no right-or-wrong answers/statements.

On a more personal level, students are networking. They meet new people and may make new friends. They are exposed to and work with other individuals who share their interests. This can be a motivator for students who are reluctant to view the service as something other than punitive. Students may also be exposed to people who may differ from them, and learning to work with different groups can be a learning experience itself. In addition, I inform students this service could be a resume' builder. Indicating service in the community on their resumes can have a positive impact on employment opportunities.

Challenges

As with any new project undertaken in a course, there are certain challenges and particular problems that need to be addressed (Perkey, 2011). It is important for the instructor to be aware of the time commitment supervising a service-learning project. As the instructor, he/she needs to make contact, at the very least, with the agencies where the students are performing their service. In an ideal situation, the faculty member has connections within the agencies. In addition, the faculty member needs to check-up on students periodically throughout the semester and make sure they are actually doing what they say they are doing (i.e. call their supervisor). In my class, (as noted above), we discuss their service experiences three times during the semester. In addition to this, I ask students weekly if they are enjoying their service, if there are any negative situations I need to be aware of and if I need to do anything to help them.

Not only is there a significant time commitment for the faculty member, but students need to be made aware of the out-of-class time commitment as well. I require my students to perform 15 hours of service at their agency. If managed well, this equals to about 1 hour per week. I find that students can carve out 1 additional hour of time during the week to engage in this project, regardless of other commitments. So, it is important at the beginning of class to get buy-in from the students. Fortunately, a number of my students have engaged or are currently engaging in some type of service the community (either voluntarily or court-mandated).

Another challenge I face is the occasional student perception that service in the community is punishment. Unfortunately, some students have done court-

mandated service and view this assignment as punitive. I spend some time at the beginning of each semester dispelling this myth, discussing how service-learning differs from court-mandated service. I inform them of the benefits of this type of learning, and even stress that the students will probably enjoy their service and the people they meet.

It is also important for students to feel comfortable coming to you if there is a problem with their experience. I have been doing this assignment for over 10 years and I have only had 2 students who had problems with other individuals in their selected agency. In one case, a student was inappropriately touched by a special-needs adult working at the agency. The student did not feel comfortable coming to me to discuss the issue she was having. Unfortunately, this student agonized for weeks before coming to me with her problem because I had stated at the beginning of class, "once you select an agency with which to work, you cannot change that agency." She took this literally and was afraid if she didn't finish, it would negatively impact her grade. Once she finally did discuss this issue with me, I was able to reassure her it was "ok" to discontinue her service and that her grade would not be negatively affected as a result. I addressed the issue with the agency supervisor, which enabled her to make some adjustments. Safety of the students is paramount.

Considering the importance of student safety, there are a number of strategies faculty members can utilize to minimize possible risks associated with service. First, I allow students to select their own organization with which to work. Allowing students to select an organization they are familiar with (or have worked with in the past) can minimize the risk of working at an unfamiliar place. If a faculty member chooses an agency for students, this can minimize risks as well (i.e. the faculty member only allows students to work with one agency with which he/she has a relationship). Second, the faculty member should encourage students to report any behavior, experiences, etc. they feel are inappropriate or wrong. Third, allow students to stop their service if there is a perceived/real issue. Depending on the point during the semester, and/or the issue the student is having, there are a number of options for grade resolution. For example, if an issue is at the beginning of the semester, the student could change agencies. If there is an issue at the end of the semester and the hours are almost completed, the student could be allowed to stop without completing the remaining hours, particularly if there is a serious situation beyond their control. In addition, the professor can use his/her discretion and work with students on an individual case-by-case basis.

Fourth, it is important for faculty and students to be aware of various legal liability issues (Dupuis, Bowdon & Schwemin, 2011). At the University, if students are engaging in any type of service outside the classroom, they are required to sign a liability waiver form through the Office of Student

Involvement. Students sign indicating they are aware of the "assumption of risk and insurance certification" and the "release, waiver of liability and covenant not to sue" form (Office of Student Involvement, para 1, 2). This not only protects the institution from possible litigation but also the faculty member.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having a service-learning assignment in an Introduction to Social Problems course creates an opportunity to incorporate a high impact practice at the beginning of a student's collegiate career. If service-learning is a component in one of these classes, this may provide opportunities for a longer community engagement and commitment. This has multiple benefits to the student, the faculty member and the institution. If students are engaged in the college/university, are engaged in their communities, and they can see the relationship between the two, everyone benefits.

It is also an appropriate and feasible way to bring their service activities into the classroom and further promote the engagement of students in the community. In addition, scaffolding the assignment within the course enables the students to spend more time reflecting thus gaining more in-depth knowledge. Although there are some challenges incorporating a service-learning project into any course, the benefits far outweigh the challenges of student safety, time commitment and the occasional stereotypical student perception of service as punishment. I have consistently found at the end of the project that students enjoyed the assignment and their experiences; many plan to continue working with the agency; and the majority of students indicate they gained valuable real-life knowledge.

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