

# Engaging Prospective Teachers in the Community for Collaboration and Cultural Competence

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine university student engagement in a variety of community based settings and analyze the impact of an assignment on developing preservice students' learning about and belief in their ability to teach in diverse settings. The experiences described in this article promote efforts to strengthen teaching and learning and facilitate cross cultural understanding and interaction. Results of this study support the use of reflection along with engagement in community based settings as a way to better prepare our teacher education students for work in diverse settings.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. ~ Margaret Mead ~*

### **InstructionCommunity Based Learning**

Involving students in community based activities is an important option for assisting students in making applications of theory to the environments outside of college classrooms. Examining the importance of community based learning in professional development, making applications of communities in classrooms, examining models for students, and developing ideas for involvement of communities at the local, national, and global levels are excellent opportunities for learning.

Researchers regularly study the impact of experience on students who perform service, as well as those who receive service in community based programs. Cochran-Smith and the Boston College Evidence Team (2009) cite the need for inquiry in teacher education as a social and cultural practice along with the need for evidence. Community based organizations and individuals in communities offer important contexts for learning, and can be a valuable part of the entire learning experience for students providing greater understanding and increased desire for engagement and learning. For the purposes of this study community based organizations are defined as those organizations in the local community that serve racial/ethnic populations.

This article includes the relevant research, a description of the collaborative experience, a description of the assignment and results of the study used with students at the undergraduate and graduate levels over two different semesters in the exploration of these topics, and outcomes of the assessments. Understanding these community organizations and they people with whom they work is useful in establishing a collaborative learning environment where participants can learn more about local racial/ethnic populations and is useful for educators.

## Literature Review

One construct that is helpful is the analytical protocol of Activity Theory, a major theme of Vygotsky's (1978) framework that stresses the importance of social interaction and its fundamental role in the development of cognition. This theory suggests that culture helps to understand the means and uses of tools and signs to mediate interactions between the humans and objects in the environment and should transfer from the community to the classroom. The design, implementation, and analysis of these experiences have been grounded in these and other sociocultural theories of learning. Ongoing study of this work focuses on the opportunities for teacher candidates to learn from their work facilitated by the community based placements and corresponding coursework according to McDonald, Tyson, Brayko, Bowman, Delport, and Shimomura (2011).

It is important for all persons engaged in community based programs or service learning to be aware of, and plan for, critical reflection and analysis of these stages, experiences, and levels of awareness. In order to better understand a part of this process Rockquemore and Schaffer (2003) have identified three stages in a theory of engagement, which are shock, normalization, and engagement. Reflecting on the experience and continual processing of thoughts, feelings, and decisions while students progress through these stages has a more significant and longer lasting impact according to Boyle-Baise (2002). Culturally responsive interaction, and eventually teaching, should draw upon the community itself in the formation of knowledge. This includes the teacher's utilization of the cultures and histories of diverse groups as teaching resources according to Gay (2010), Nieto (2011), and Villegas and Lucas (2002). Since some students find the concept of multicultural teaching a bit abstract and their involvement in community based learning can assist in bridging this gap.

Colleges and universities that strive to develop students who are well rounded typically are more involved with projects involving community engagement and service learning opportunities to a greater degree than research universities (Campus Compact, 2007). Some universities are also attempting to embrace the goal of engaging all students within the community (Closson & Nelson, 2009). The intent of these colleges and universities is to move their students from passively receiving knowledge gained through college coursework to actively building and applying their knowledge in real-world environments.

Community based education and types of service learning are becoming increasingly common in both the health and human services education programs but need to be interwoven with academic disciplines for effectiveness. Community based educational programs and community service can help students learn, develop, apply, reflect on, and deepen their commitment to the learning process according to Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, and Geschwind (2000). Different types of service professions have always required some type of practical experiences in the “real world”. Since these often were only in the form of site visits, practica, or internships this study sought to deepen and broaden the student’s experiences in the local community.

Teaching with a commitment to advancing the common good or working for social justice begins with engaging the learner in deliberate, reflective practice. Reflection is a key component of the program and of community based projects and should connect these experiences with course objectives as previously noted. “The essence of engaging in community-based learning is the imperative to ‘learn from’ the service and community experience(s) rather than ‘learn about’ them” (Fiddler & Marienau, 2008, p. 1). Fiddler and Marienau further suggest that reflective practice which brings about meaningful learning lies at the intersection of context

and process. The responsibility of colleges of education committed to democratic practice and social justice is to prepare teachers who are intentionally reflective regarding cultural and social interactions and their impact on learning. In order to engage in self-awareness learners must examine their own culture and then the culture of others. Next, the examination must lead to actions for social justice. Thus, critical reflection and community based learning activities are mainstays of curriculum and instruction promoting an understanding of the issues of democratic practice in relation to concepts of social justice.

The overall goal of any community based involvement must be to balance the needs of all involved. According to Furco (1996) for any community-level placement, consideration must be made for both the individual interactions between students and representative community members, and the interaction between the student and the community as a whole. If these are not taken into account, serious issues may arise and impact social learning and one's ability to work effectively with the local community members. Wenger (1998) discusses communities of practice as well and speaks about the social learning that occurs when a common interest exists. The interactions are thus enhanced when these factors are taken into consideration.

Culturally responsible pedagogists need to transfer the knowledge base about teaching for the common good into actions, inclusive of language, behaviors, and practices to accomplish *democracy*, what these authors equate with *social justice*. Banks (2004) contends that multicultural education is essential in working with students. Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996) have argued that there must be the development of a commitment to find a common ground on which to build a common understanding, a major component of the community based assignment. Jeavons (1995) describes service learning as an experiential and collaborative mode that, among other things, prepares students for life-long learning by connecting formal education

more fully with real-world experience, prepares students for citizenship by engaging them in dealing directly with community problems, and challenging their assumptions and requiring students to integrate multiple point of view.

Teaching and teacher education for social justice are drawn from several different but interrelated political and intellectual movements (Cochran-Smith, 1998) and can be facilitated by active community based learning, according to Zollers, Albert, and Cochran-Smith (2000). These movements include critical social theory, critical economic theory, civil rights movements, critical educational theory, and critical race theory.

The responsibility of colleges of education committed to democratic practice and social justice is to prepare teachers who are critically culturally reflective, and conscious of social interactions and their contribution to the liberation or the oppression of others. Three distinct types of learning, according to Altman (1996), include content knowledge, process knowledge, and socially relevant knowledge. This study seeks to impact all three.

Boyle-Baise (2005) stated that most pre-service teachers initially felt little or no connection to the community until after successful engagement in a community based project. Therefore, the community based project was initiated to further test this theory. A number of other benefits have been discussed in the literature, including an increase in commitment to values. It may be contended that this type of community based involvement would positively impact the participants and provide a positive impact in relationship to the mission of the institution. Beckman, Brandenberger, and Smith Shappell (2009) indicate that teaching and scholarship that integrate a community based orientation will provide an important means to advancing learning goals in any discipline be it at the undergraduate or graduate level. According to Palincsar and Herrenkohl (2002), the development of programs of learning that incorporate

community based learning must take into account the types of programs and cultural systems of the learning including cultural, social, economic, communication, and related systems. This important research provided the impetus to initiate the community based research and interview assignment as a requirement and key assessment for all students in the licensure program.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine university student engagement in a variety of community based settings and to assess the impact of the experience on teacher candidates' perceived ability to work in diverse settings. Student perceptions were assessed after involving undergraduate and graduate students in a required human relations/multicultural education course that included an assigned community based involvement activity in diverse settings. Student self-reflections, surveys, assignments, and other student works were also evaluated. The findings suggest curricular options for engaging students in an ongoing process that is shared, and based on application of multicultural academic content in community based activities. The activities need to be in highly diverse settings, have been discussed in courses, and allow for reflection and application by students. Based on the mission of the university and school of education, the stated goal is to educate practitioners to be morally responsible leaders, who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good. Advancing the common good is often understood as working for social justice and equity. One of the ways the university seeks to accomplish this is through offering community based activities. Collaboration in the community and reflection upon that collaboration are key components of community based learning projects and connect collaborative experiences with course objectives for students at this university.

## Community Based Research: Context and Assessment

This research was conducted at a private liberal arts (the term *liberal arts* denotes a curriculum that imparts general knowledge and develops the student's rational thought and intellectual capabilities as part of the required curriculum) university in a midwestern region of the United States that incorporated service learning and community based learning into some of its courses. The course for this project was a multicultural education course, which was designed to promote the consideration of varieties of experiences in education and contains required a community based learning experience as a key assessment and was required at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Candidates for licensure are required to complete coursework in multicultural studies and are learning about social identities (race, class, gender, socio-economic status, religion/spirituality, exceptionalities, sexual orientation, and related issues) and other elements and aspects of culture including elements contributing to ethnic identities. The upper Midwest region is home to large populations of Hmong, Somali, Karen, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Russians, Mexican-Americans, and other specific racial/ethnic groups. In order to better understand these community members and related concepts, and to make more accurate applications to their future classrooms, students are to research local communities, community resources, and individuals. After conducting their research and interacting with community organizations and community members they develop an individual written report and group presentation. The student-generated report examines the impact of race and ethnicity as well as other social identities in the assigned community based setting.

The expectation for the students was that they research and gather information about the racial/ethnic group to which they have been assigned and discuss their findings with their other assigned group members. After reviewing the rubric and suggested questions, the class discusses any additional questions they have and individually arrange to interview a person who self-identifies as a member of the specific overall group to which they have been assigned (e.g., Somali, Hmong, Mexican-American, Korean-American). Then they conduct a structured interview with a person who self-identifies as a member of that specific racial/ethnic group. They share their findings and are also required to write a reflective paper (8-10 pages) based on this information as well as a short case study to further demonstrate applications to their current or future profession as teachers. It is essential the person they interview self-identifies as a member of the group to which they are assigned for their group project. This assists the students in creating a personal knowledge from the first-hand accounts the person shares. (Assignment is available upon request.)

#### Research Study and Participants

This study examined the responses on a post assessment instrument from candidates enrolled in required education courses. The scores from the last week of classes in each course were compared and analyses were run to see if changes had occurred as a result of the community based assignment. Perceptions that were self-reported and interview papers were also examined to check for consistency of comments related to the assignment. There were 44 students who completed the post assessments in the first administration and 27 in the second administration one semester later. Of that number 17 were undergraduate students, 23 were graduate students, and 4 listed no designation in the first administration; and 5 undergraduate students and 22 graduate students in the second administration. All were enrolled in a program

seeking licensure to teach in elementary, secondary, or K-12 settings.

## **Procedures and Participants**

A research packet consisting of the assessment and a personal data sheet were distributed to all participants who were enrolled in the courses the 15<sup>th</sup> week of a 15-week class. Permission from the Institutional Review Board was sought and granted and all IRB protocols were followed. This included informed consent for all participants that their participation was anonymous and voluntary, and that there was no reward or penalty for participation in this study. The participants were asked to sign a consent form. The last week of class was selected as the most appropriate time to administer the assessment to provide familiarity with the course, the assignment, and to allow for time for the participants to consider its overall meaning and potential applications. All completed forms were placed in manila envelopes by the participants and returned to a graduate assistant. The courses were completed and all grades were assigned prior to opening the envelopes to tabulate the results.

Participants in 3 separate classes were asked to voluntarily fill out a post assessment based on their experience resulting from the community based interaction and interview. A second group of students was surveyed in a later semester using a post design consistent with the first administration. Students were asked to voluntarily fill out a pre and post assessment based on their experience resulting from the community based interaction and interview. The first instrument consisted of 39 items with Likert-type responses, 2 yes/no response items, and 4 open-ended responses. The revised instrument consisted of 24 items with Likert-type responses,

2 yes/no response items, and 4 open-ended responses. Only the items that were the same on both instruments were compared and analyzed.

The instrument was divided into three separate sections not including the demographic data in Part I. Part II Items used a 5 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree, and Part III items used a 4 point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 not at all to 4 a great deal. Part IV items included yes/no responses and open-ended response questions.

Examples are listed in Table 4.

All participants were candidates for licensure enrolled in courses required in their respective programs of study. The courses included three sections of a graduate course in Human Relations/Multicultural Education, and one section of a course in undergraduate Human Relations/Multicultural Education. The undergraduate section and one graduate section met concurrently. All participants were students enrolled in a private predominantly white university located in a metropolitan area in the mid-west. The participants were asked to voluntarily list their sex, age, self-identification of race, and self-identification of ethnic/cultural background as well as some other descriptors each time they filled out the survey. The results were then compiled and analyzed through qualitative methods. A review of the responses to the open-ended questions was also conducted. Both of these reviews were conducted by persons with knowledge in the areas of qualitative and quantitative analysis and were not involved with the participants or researcher.

### **Demographics**

There were 44 students who completed the assessments in the first administration and 27 in the second with the slightly redesigned survey. Of that number 17 were undergraduate students, 23 graduate students, and 4 listed no designation in the first administration; and there

were 5 undergraduate students, 22 graduate students in the second administration. Fifteen participants were male and 29 were female in the first administration and 21 were female and 6 were male in the second administration. Of the first administration 2 participants selected African American, 2 Asian American, 1 Hispanic, 1 American Indian, 5 Biracial/Multiracial, and 31 European American; while in the second administration 23 selected European American, and 4 participants selected Biracial/Multiracial. Tables 1, 2, and 3 represent the demographics of the participants

*Insert Tables 1, 2, and 3 about here.*

## **Context**

All courses were required as core courses for education licensure and were devoted strictly to multicultural issues. Core programs are those that require all students who plan to graduate to successfully to complete the requisite courses specified as requirements. One group consisted of undergraduate students and three groups were graduate students. All sections of the courses met once a week for 150 minutes for 15 weeks. The combined undergraduate and graduate sections of the graduate course in Human Relations/Multicultural Education had the same instructor who was a White male professor with a doctorate in educational psychology. The other sections had either a Black male professor with a doctorate in educational leadership or an American Indian professor with a doctorate in children's literature. All three professors have numerous years of experience in teaching the course, regularly collaborate, and used the same

texts and assignments. One of the three instructors was the researcher while the other two served solely as course instructors.

All of the sections were assigned readings by authors from a variety of cultural backgrounds and given assignments to analyze their own culture and at least one other culture and make specific applications to the classroom. Students were also given specific criteria and assigned the task of community based research and conducting an interview with a person who self-defined as a member of a specific racial/ethnic and cultural group (different than their own). All assignments were designed to increase and assess awareness, knowledge, skills, and make reflective applications of multicultural concepts to their roles as future educators.

## **Results**

An analysis was run on participants by section to determine if there were any differences due to instructor of their course and no significant differences were found. After reviewing the initial survey results and refining the instrument, a second group of students was surveyed using a design similar to the first administration. Overall the study shows an increase in the number of students who indicated a change in their perceptions and assumptions and the second part indicates a positive impact on their preparation for teaching. Table 4 shows a comparison of the first and second groups' responses to the activity and their combined responses on selected questions from the survey. All participants indicated that they felt they could make a difference in the world. Eighty-three percent of the participants indicated a change in their perceptions due to their community based assignment and 78.8 percent indicated the community based assignment helped them to be better prepared to teach. This assignment helped you become a better professional in schools 77% indicated a great deal, 14% said quite a bit, and 9% said

somewhat. This further confirms the importance and impact of the assignment on teacher candidates' perceptions of learning about and dealing with diverse communities.

Insert Table 4 about here

The results show that 73 percent of the participants indicated the community based learning helped them to be better prepared to teach the first time the activity was required, 85 percent indicated the community based learning helped them to be better prepared to teach the second time the classes were surveyed.

### **Discussion**

After review of the data it was discovered that two of the *No responses* in the first administration commented on the process of the survey itself rather than the outcome of the activity. There were some repercussions that became evident from comments on the first set of assessments and class discussions reported due to the fact that this was a new assignment that was required for the first time the same semester as the first administration of the instrument. Upon further discussion with some of the students the following semester, it was revealed that they responded negatively to the requirement rather than to the actual learning experience. A pretest was not given since many students entering the course believe they have sufficient knowledge of diverse communities and this belief skews the outcomes according to Warring, Keim, & Rau (1998).

### **Results and Discussion**

Despite issues with the first administration, 79 percent of those surveyed indicated better preparation to teach. Given the fact that some of the students reported now being actively involved in communities of color, the results are overwhelmingly successful. As an example, some students reported this was the most they had ever talked with a person from another racial/ethnic group and were amazed at how much they had learned. Others report this was the best learning experience they had and remarked on how much it will help them become a better teacher.

Still others reported they had discussions with people they thought they knew and found out previously unknown information that was subsequently shared of significant value. Over ninety percent of the students reported the finding of previously unknown valuable community resources that they planned to use in their future education and teaching. Others report the need for continuing this project and the research and discussions occurring prior to the community interviews. Some indicated a continuation of this type of research in their hometowns and explained how they planned to have their own students engage in a similar project.

Other students reported that they now see the value in getting to know their students, families, and communities better and delving more into their learning styles. They also reported feeling more comfortable in speaking with community members and better understand problems and issues in schools. Students also reported having more confidence in being able to work in diverse schools.

Eighty-two percent of the students indicated that the strength of the research they conducted and the research discussed in class prior to their discussions with their interviewee were very beneficial. The combining of reflective practice with issues of social justice and equity also draws from and upon critical theory which and critical social theory which, according to

Leonardo (2004) places criticism at the center of knowledge production. The intellectual stimulation and engagement seeks to ask questions of the students to stretch them and cause them to seek new levels of understanding. This is especially significant when dealing with issues of social justice and equity whereby it is often the most effective manner in which to encourage students to reevaluate their statements and positions. Leonardo (2004) more fully explains when he states, “critical social theory begins with the premise that criticism targets systematic and institutional arrangements, how people create them, and how educators may ameliorate their harmful effects on schools.” (p. 13) In order to confront social inequalities such as those of equity and social justice, critical reflection is employed similar to critical theory. There often do not exist easy solutions to problems, only good questions to encourage students to seek out ways of understanding and acting on a personal and group level.

Some students reported this was the most they had ever talked with a person from another racial/ethnic group and are amazed at how much they learned and how it applies to their classrooms. This is supported by a quote from the post assessment. *“It made me realize that there are very diverse learners that I will have in class.”* Others reported this was the best learning experience they have had and remark on how much it will help them become a better teacher. This is substantiated by a quote from the post assessment by one of the participants. *“I learned a great deal about making connections in the community with different groups and how this will help me as a teacher.”*

Still other students reported they had discussions with people they thought they knew and found out previously unknown information of significant value. Two more direct quotes from the post assessment supports this outcome. *“Understanding another person’s culture is the cornerstone for learning about students and appreciating them as individuals.”*

Many students reported the finding of previously unknown valuable community resources that they plan to use in their future education and teaching. Others reported the need for continuing this project and the research and discussions. Community based educational programs can help students understand, apply, reflect upon, and develop a deeper commitment to the learning process and their communities. The university should seek out partnerships whenever possible since these provide greater leverage for the students as well as oversight. The author suggests a focus on engaging students in an on-going, shared, self-assessment process based in service-learning and/or community based activities integrated with academic content. Tying in research that is appropriate for students at all levels will better prepare them for working more effectively in an increasingly more diverse global society. As one participant stated on the post assessment, *“It made me realize that I need to do more research on my own to better understand cultures different than my own to be a successful teacher.”* Some of the students who were in the class were also the researcher’s advisees and after the semester was over some of those students also shared that they were actively engaged in service learning and volunteer work in communities of color and felt the assignment and survey were somewhat unnecessary and redundant. However, they agreed that not all students were similarly engaged and that the requirement was a valuable learning experience for *them*.

### **Summary**

As previously noted most participants initially felt little or no connection to the community until after successful engagement in a community based project. These types of projects meet real needs and priorities for individuals and communities, and provide participants with greater knowledge of the local communities and provide individuals in these communities

with better connections to educators. Examples of engagement with diverse communities and the impact on students' knowledge bases and dispositions within the context of promoting democratic practice, embracing social justice, and diversity can be significant outcomes of properly facilitated community based learning activities. Community based organizations offer important contexts for learning, which can be a valuable part of the entire learning experience and leave the students with the desire for more. The assignment was deemed a success by our standards and as reported by the students in the research study. The department has also made this assignment a key assessment tool for the program and is incorporated in required portfolios for program completion.

The assignment was also positively rated on the end of semester course evaluations. The community based work will also be a significant element in the redesign of a collaborative residency-based teacher-training program. The author is currently conducting a study with all program completers from the past five years to determine the impact of this assignment as well as other components of the licensure program.

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Table 1  
*Race or Ethnic Identity*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>	<u>Total</u>
African American	2	0	2
Asian American	2	0	2
American Indian	1	0	1
Hispanic	1	0	1
European American	31	23	54
Biracial/Multiracial	5	4	9
Total	44	27	71

Table 2  
*Gender*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>	<u>Total</u>
Male	15	6	21
Female	29	21	50
Total	44	27	71

Table 3  
*Grade Level*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>	<u>Total</u>
Undergraduate	17	5	22
Graduate	23	22	45
No Designation	4	0	4
Total	44	27	71

Table 4  
Responses to, *“I feel I can make a difference in the world.”*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>		<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
A Great Deal	39	88.6%	23	85%	64	88%
Quite a Bit	5	11.4%	4	15%	9	12%
Somewhat	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Not a all	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
No Response	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Note: percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number

Responses to, *“Help you to become a better professional in the schools.”*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>		<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Great Deal	34	77%	21	78%	55	77%
Quite a Bit	6	14%	4	15%	10	14%
Somewhat	4	9%	2	7%	6	9%
Not a all	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
No Response	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

Note: percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number

Responses to, *“Did any of your prior perceptions or assumptions change as a result of conducting this interview?”*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>		<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Yes	35	80%	24	89%	59	83%
No	8	18%	2	7%	10	14%
No Response	1	2%	1	2%	2	3%

Responses to *“Did this activity help you to be better prepared to teach?”*

	<u>1<sup>st</sup> Admin</u>		<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Admin</u>		<u>Total</u>	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Yes	33	75%	23	85%	56	78.8%
No	10	23%	3	11%	13	18.4%
No Response	1	2%	1	4	2	2.8%

Note: percentages were rounded to the nearest whole number