Service-Learning: The Practical Agent of Change for Diversity in Student Learning

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Abstract

Diversity and mutual respect is built from serving others. Service-learning is an educational teaching strategy that is focused on student total involvement, learning and cooperation. Service-Learning provides opportunities for students to extend their own perspectives and experience differing perspectives of others. Through Service-Learning, structures exist for students to explore their own biases about race, cultures and stereotyping. During reflections students experience Social & Emotional competencies to become more self-aware and thus create an opportunity to critically analyze biases that exist and develop means to eliminate those biases. The purpose of this research is to promote the use of Service-Learning as a practical application in an established curriculum and help identify the cultural biases that hinder individual growth and learning. As students participate in Service-Learning opportunities, including structured reflections, they begin to recognize their own biases and can work to overcome these biases.

Introduction

Research indicates that racial and ethnic diversity broadens students' perspective. For universities in rural or inner city locations, this poses a problem. Creating a rich racial and ethnic learning experience for students calls for creative programming. One viable option in integrating diversity is through service-learning which is explored later. This integration is supported through Gurin's (1999) research on three types of diversity: structural, classroom and interactional diversity. This paper will focus on interactional diversity or informal and formal interactions which during actual service-learning where partnerships are formed with diverse community members.

U.S. News & World Report (2015) drew data from several Tennessee institutions' student body from the 2014-2015 school year. Their formula produced an index that ranged from 0-1 and factored in the total proportion of minority students which included black or African-American, Hispanic, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, white (non-Hispanic) and multiracial. Students who did not identify themselves as members of any of those demographic groups were classified as non-Hispanic white for the purposes of their calculations. The closer a school's number is to 1, the more diverse the student population. Rankings for colleges in eastern portions of Tennessee are listed below.

East Tennessee State University .30

University of Tennessee at Knoxville .30

Lipscomb .30

University of Tennessee at Martin .37

Middle Tennessee State University .46

Vanderbilt .53

These rankings make a compelling call to universities who value diversity to broaden their perspectives for formal or informal interactional across diverse groups, one of which can be service-learning.

When considering Service-Learning, many definitions come to mind. While there are multiple differences, most are very similar. One well recognized definition is, "a teaching methodology that enriches instruction with thoughtfully designed opportunities for students to use their skills and knowledge in service to and with the community" (Harris, Silver, Bartone, & Armstrong, 2014, p. 28). Other definitions consider Service Learning as a form of experimental education using community service as a means to support course-based learning (Becker, 2000; Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Riddle, 2003). Finally, "Service Learning is an exciting educational strategy that connects serving the community with the learning already being done in a school, program or organization" (Cote, Zorn, & Liptrot, 2009, p. 1). Each of the definitions is similar, but not exactly the same.

Of the Standards for Service Learning, the most well-known is reflection. While there are differing opinions on what reflection is and how it should be used, most agree it is a most valuable tool to deepen learning outcomes (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005). The National Youth Leadership Council anticipates that Service-learning will utilize many and varying reflection activities in all projects. Reflective activities should be "ongoing and that prompt deep thinking and analysis about oneself and one's relationship to society" (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008, p.2). Ball and Schilling (2006, p.279) described reflection as "thoughtful self-examination." It requires the students not only be introspective about what they are doing or have done, but to analyze their actions during the service and therefore, reinforcing their learning. Reflection is what makes service-learning different from

other types of experiential learning (Becker, 2000). Reflection carries many benefits including

integrating the students' "experiences, thoughts and feelings" into the class content (Molee,

Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010, p. 241).

Many instructors use reflection pieces for assessment. Service-learning assessments can

evaluate how the student is staying the course and if success is demonstrated in such areas as

work ethic, diversity, fairness, and patience (Okpala, Sturdivant, & Hopson, 2009). Service-

learning assessment can be defined as "the systematic collection of information about (student)

learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise and resources available" (Walvoord, 2004, p.2).

"Service-learning assessment of the community partner by the university and of the university by

the community partner helps to institutionalize service-learning" (Waters, 2015, p. 2).

While some instructors focus reflective activities on assessment (Molee et al., 2010),

reflection synchronizes well with other service-learning standards. One of those standards is

diversity. The National Youth Leadership Council developed four indicators for diversity in

service learning which are:

1. Service-learning helps participants identify and analyze different points of view to

    gain understanding of multiple perspectives;

2. Service-learning helps participants develop interpersonal skills in conflict

    resolution and group decision making;

3. Service-learning helps participants actively seek to understand and value the

    diverse backgrounds and perspectives of those offering and receiving service;

4. Service-learning encourages participants to recognize and overcome stereotypes.

    (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008, p.2.).

Diversity is important to the maturation and success of everyone and Service-Learning provides many opportunities to experience diverse cultures and circumstances. Root and Billig reported that service became meaningful for students due to interaction with others, particularly if they were facing "personal difficulties, confronting examples of injustice or encountering inefficient policies" (Root & Billig, 2008, p. 109). Service-Learning projects that involve people/communities of different cultures than the students involved, offers unique opportunities to learn about those cultures and people from the inside. They become a part of that culture as they serve and have the unique opportunity to witness the culture through the eyes of its own members. "Apart from studying abroad, service learning is one of the best approaches to combine praxis and knowledge in second language acquisition and cross-cultural competence" (Wehling, 2008, p. 300). Kuhn gets more specific by recognizing that students who participate in service-learning will "experience diversity through contact with people who are different than themselves" (Kuh, 2008, p. 28). Service learning as an instructional strategy "provides instructors with a way to cross the boundary between campus and surrounding community" (Parys, 2015, p. 107). It gives students and the service receivers the opportunity to interact with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures.

Increasing the exposure to diverse cultures and individuals is a significant component of Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP). "LEAP is a national advocacy campus action and research initiative that champions the importance of twenty-first century liberal education – for individuals and for a nation dependent on economic creativity and democratic vitality" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 1). The four Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) of LEAP dovetail nicely with Service Learning:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world

- Intellectual and practical skills

- Personal and social responsibility

- Integrative and applied learning (www.aacu.org/leap/)

Kuhn (2008) identified service-learning as one of the high-impact practices that can be used to infuse LEAP concepts into college and university curricula.   While most of the concepts are not new, the LEAP initiative is based on "the collective effort to document the impact of these practices and efforts to see them as a larger 'sea change' in undergraduate education" (McNair & Albertine, 2012, 27-28). LEAP and the ELOs of LEAP work with service-learning through a stronger knowledge and ultimate understanding of human cultures, the ability to utilize practical skills as they are related to the course curricula, personal and social responsibility in dealing with the community issues and needs, and becoming competent in applying the content learning to real-world situations and problems. The examination of human cultures and the appreciation and understanding of diverse cultures is an important tenant of LEAP. The LEAP initiative and Service-Learning are natural partners, particularly since the "ability to relate to and respect others lies at the heart of the mission statement of (many) colleges and universities across the nation" (Parys, 2015, p. 107).

One of the best ways, if not the best way to achieve active involvement with diverse communities is through service-learning (Parys, 2015). How the involvement is defined varies from university to university and community to community, but the notion of establishing communities through service that respect diverse perspectives and cultures is critical to education in general and to the growth and development of individuals in particular. Strong university/community partnerships are critical to establishing the types of service learning projects that give the students diverse perspectives and understandings. Growing the number of

university/community partnerships is not the only answer. The structure and mutual cooperation is the need of mutually beneficial partnerships. Strong partnerships are seen as the means for mutual transformation of university and community stakeholders (Jameson, Clayton, & Jaeger, 2011).

Strong university/community partnerships collaborate in problem-solving activities where students and community partners participate together to strengthen the combined communities (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). To be successful, partnerships need established roles. Some of the important roles are: collaborator, solution generator, knowledge producer, willing participants in problem solving, co-creator, co-learner and co-educator (Dostilio, 2014). "Being clear on the means by which stakeholders engage one another is important to a shared understanding and appreciation of engagement" (Dostilio, 2014, p. 242).

Service-learning is a teaching methodology. How it is implemented makes a large difference in the successes of the projects, students and partnerships. Diversity, while it does not always play a leading role, adds significantly to growth of both the students as well as the community being served.

Interactional Diversity

During the service-learning experience, formal or informal interactional diversity takes place in the community with a partnership. A partnership can take many varied forms. At its simplest level, it may involve an informal relationship between a leader of volunteers in an agency and a teacher in a local school working together on a project. At the other end of the spectrum, a partnership may be full-scale community collaboration in which schools, agencies community members, students, city government and businesses all work together to design and implement a system-wide/community-wide service-learning initiate.

Five types of partnerships can be formed during the actual service-learning. They are

listed and described below.

> **No Partnership: T**he agency and school have no contact. A school might serve
> the community in ways that link back to the curriculum but have no ties with
> community organization.
> **Connection:** The agency and instructor have superficial contact on an as needed
> basis. For example, an instructor might occasionally connect with community
> agencies for curriculum-connected services such as mentoring in math or English.
> **Cooperation:** The agency and instructor/class share information that is useful to
> each other. These partnerships last only as long as the project is going on within
> the course.
> **Coordination:** The partners work together in planning a specific effort or
> program which meets the needs of the curriculum and community.
> **Collaboration:** The partners form a new structure to share an ongoing
> commitment to leadership in, and ownership of, a formal service learning
> partnership.

Of course, the one which fosters a shared sense of community and offers opportunities for

students to learn from each other including the community partners and share resources is ideal

in interactional diversity. It is here that college students can gain valuable experiences and

insights regarding themselves and people from other cultures.

For example, Gross and Maloney (2012) reported increased cultural competence after

service-learning experiences among secondary-education teacher candidates with diverse

populations in the first year of college. The pre-service teachers were required to keep learning

logs throughout the semester to record personal reactions to every hour of service, follow up with

bi-weekly reflective papers and then participate in weekly class discussions. The principal

researcher collected all written work and transcribed whole class discussions. Gross and

Maloney reported "the teacher candidates not only reinforced goals of becoming teachers but

also experienced personal rewards from teaching through cultural exchanges that broadened

awareness and increased sensitivity. The students gained an appreciation for urban living and

the struggles of immigrants in their attempts to adjust to a new country and language"(Gross and Maloney, 2012, 192-196).

Each of the universities previously listed in the U.S. News and World Report have service-learning initiatives. Tennessee State University requires all freshmen to take a 1.0 credit course which includes 8 hours of service. Dr. Chip Harris (co-author) taught this course for several years and added the requirement of a reflective journal to chronicle their experiences. With the aid of buses, students were taken to various schools whose population included White, Black, Hispanics, Asians and Kurdish and worked in the Reading Lab to mentor struggling readers. What rich experiences these students were afforded and how great the impact on the total college experience and into their career.

Conclusion

Service learning is an instructional methodology that allows students to apply the skills taught in the classroom to real-world situations. It is a practical application of their learning. It is, however, a much greater tool than simply applying what the student learns. When properly implemented, service learning brings the student into a team that identifies a need and works with a community partner to address that need. In the process the students exercise teamwork, decision-making, communications and many more skills. Even more importantly, service learning puts students into diverse situations outside of the classroom. Working with and experiencing groups from different cultures and backgrounds could easily be a more meaningful experience than the initial classroom learning and the practical application of that learning.

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