

Back to the Basics: Service Learning and the Asian American Community

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Introduction

“If we would teach our students to care about important social problems, and think about them rigorously, then clearly our institutions of learning must set a high example in the conduct of their own affairs. In addition to responding to its students, a university must examine its social responsibilities if it wishes to acquire an adequate understanding of its proper role and purpose in present-day society” (Bok, 1982, p. 10-11).

Former Harvard University President Derek Bok has urged institutions of higher education to exercise a moral mindfulness around their educational mission and larger sense of purpose. Today, over two decades later, Bok’s call remains an important and timely one. The risk for American colleges and universities to become self-absorbed, isolated from larger society, and engaged in research considered esoteric is an unfortunate and apparent one. This risk has pushed educators like Bok, and, more recently, the University of Pennsylvania’s Ira Harkavy, to call for the integration of problem-driven, community-centric service learning initiatives into the landscape of higher education (Harkavy, 1993; Benson et.al., 2000).

Service learning is an academic tool of significant interest and promise. By definition, its aim is to offer an “experience in which students participate in an organized service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Proponents of service learning argue against the current attention to vocational training pervasive on college campuses. They promote the value community-university collaborations offered not only within the context of individual development and learning, but also toward the furthering of aggregate knowledge and human welfare.

Service learning can trace its roots back to the sixties and seventies, when the push to empower neglected communities was a forceful one. Notably, Ethnic Studies, which was also born during that period, is credited with demanding an increased community voice in education. Further, the reallocation of university resources to more

directly encourage social justice has historically been advocated by Ethnic Studies. Community-based service learning has provided a cornerstone in the pioneering vision of Asian American Studies in particular. Glenn Omatsu (1999, par. 8) had this to say about Asian American Studies:

“Thirty years ago, the founding vision of Asian American Studies emphasized a critical link between learning about society and changing it. Education was defined as not merely imparting information to students but promoting critical awareness and encouraging political engagement.”

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) has historically placed due emphasis on forging and strengthening links with the surrounding community, and, in line with the founding vision of Asian American Studies, Penn’s Asian American Studies program strives to offer service learning opportunities for its students.

The strategic, academically-based Asian American Studies service learning course discussed in this paper, has enrolled both high school and college students. The course strived to cultivate a heightened sense of civic awareness and responsibility for college students, while concurrently providing a supportive, safe space of intellectual and emotional encouragement for the high school and elementary school student participants. High school and college students facilitated lessons in the Alexander Wilson Elementary School using cooperative learning teams to promote cross race friendships and to provide character education for the elementary school participants (Clark, 1985). The lessons were developed in accordance with the core curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia, which emphasizes key character education concepts.

The lessons were taught in a second grade classroom at the Alexander Wilson Elementary School in West Philadelphia. During the pilot year of the program, 94.5% of the students enrolled in the school were African American and 86.5% were from low-income backgrounds (Welcome to Info Resources, 2003). The second grade class was comprised of twenty-eight students with a variety of academic abilities. The ten college student participants were pursuing a variety of majors such as business, English, nursing, engineering, and urban studies. The students were of traditional college age, and the majority of students had attended elite private schools all over the country. Most students were from middle class or upper middle class backgrounds. All of the students identified as Asian American. The majority of the college students were either Chinese American

or Indian American. Seven Asian American high school students from Franklin Learning Center High School were selected to participate in the course through the Future Leaders Program (FLP), a program sponsored by Penn's Asian American Studies Program, Pan-Asian American Community House and Young Scholars Program. FLP is open to high school juniors and seniors in the Philadelphia School District. There is no tuition charge for FLP students. Tuition cost was paid by the Young Scholars Program, and costs for textbooks and travel were covered by the Asian American Studies program. Potential first-generation college students in their junior or senior year of high school were especially encouraged to apply. The majority of high school student participants identified as Cambodian American, Vietnamese American, or Chinese American.

According to Ramaley (2000), partnerships between institutions and communities can be appropriate ways to address large scale reforms. The service learning project was developed in response to 1) a movement for Philadelphia school reform, 2) a growing tension between racial/ethnic groups in Philadelphia public schools, and 3) the movement to strengthen links between local communities and higher education institutions. The lessons move beyond volunteerism and community service by helping elementary school students, high school students, and college students develop a better understanding of a multicultural society, and the larger meaning of community through service learning (Moore and Sandholtz, 1999).

Service learning is an excellent way to help students develop a strong sense of civic and social responsibility (Haynes and Comer, 1997). This exploratory study strives to answer the question *what impact does service learning in Asian American studies have on Philadelphia school reform?*

Background

Today, despite the "changed terrain," Asian American Studies can and must serve as a vehicle for community service without "neglecting curriculum and pedagogy" (Kenyon, 2000). The strategic academically based community service course strives to foster structural community improvement by creating a space where students can develop friendships across racial/ethnic, language, socioeconomic, geographic, and intergenerational boundaries (Benson & Harkavy, 1996). The lesson plans discussed in

this article were developed in response to 1) a movement for Philadelphia school reform and 2) a growing tension between racial/ethnic groups in Philadelphia public schools, and 3) a movement for strengthening partnerships between higher education institutions and local communities.

In a 1997 film produced by Asian Americans United of Philadelphia, a student from University City High School in West Philadelphia declared that the school is not safe for Asian people. “When we walk down the hallway, we hear, “Oh! We smell fish.” They push us a lot. Me and my friends, we get into fights every single day.” (Asian Americans United, 1997). The racial composition of University City High School is 97% African American (Welcome to Info Resources, 2003). Despite the similar forms of oppression and discrimination faced by people of color, racial conflict such as this is not uncommon today (Immigrants and Racial/Ethnic Tensions, 2003).

According to the American Friends Service Committee, several factors contribute to the sources of tension between people of color. The mainstream media promotes negative stereotypes and images of people of color. These damaging images can result in hate violence against people of color. In addition, people of color are encouraged to work against each other in a system where individuals and communities compete for scarce resources. The mainstream promotes the idea that anyone in the United States can succeed if they try hard enough. Asian Americans have often been held up as models by the mainstream, promoting the “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps” mentality despite the significant barriers and problems that exist within the diverse Asian American community (Immigrants and Racial/Ethnic Tensions, 2003).

In educational settings, racial stereotypes against Asian Americans such as the model minority myth can create racial tension and conflict. Asian American students in such a situation may withdraw from the school community or fight back, physically or verbally (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995, p.176). “The portrayal of Asian Americans as a hardworking, successful group is usually accompanied by invidious comparisons to Blacks,” further exacerbating racial tensions between the two groups (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995, p.95). As a reform mechanism, the service learning course model employed here can help communities of color find common ground by promoting the larger meaning of community.

Research Design

A two-phase design was conducted developmentally. In the first part, qualitative reflection paper methodology was used sequentially to inform the second qualitative focus group methodology. Reflection papers were assigned to students after each community service project. The reflection paper data was used to inform the conduct of the second qualitative focus group methodology. According to Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000), reflection is a powerful way to connect the service experience to the academic course material.

Two separate focus groups were conducted. Each focus group had nine participants excluding the moderator. High school students in grades nine through 12 constituted one focus group. The second session was comprised of Penn students at different stages in their academic career and from a variety of academic disciplines. The naturalistic conditions associated with the conduct of this research disallowed the random assignment of students to experimental treatment groups and non-treatment control groups (Babbie, 1998, pp. 249-250). Students were asked to respond to the focus groups while they were in their “natural settings” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15), where the “artificiality” of controlled experiments did not confound the results (Babbie, 1998, p. 252). The question-guide used during both sessions can be found in Appendix A.

A purposive, non-probability approach was used for the selection of focus group subjects. The use of multiple groups was consistent with Babbie’s (1998, p. 248) suggestion, and the group sizes were within the range recommended by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 57). The researchers developed a focus protocol using Krueger’s (1994) model of the process of conducting focus groups.

Data was collected from students regarding their experience with service learning through the Asian American Studies course; therefore this research was conducted at the individual unit of analysis. This unit allowed for summary descriptions of all such individuals, as well as to explain differences and relationships (Babbie, 1998, p. 93). Using qualitative data analysis techniques, the data were examined to explore the impact of service learning in Asian American Studies on urban school reform. A theory of

successful service learning projects aimed at urban school reform was developed based on the data by following techniques for developing grounded theory.

An Overview of Grounded Theory: The Impact of Service Learning in Asian American Studies on Philadelphia School Reform

Since the “No Child Left Behind Act” became law in 2002, school systems across the nation have been subject to heightened levels of state accountability (No Child Left Behind, 2002). School reform remains a point of heated debate today as community members, educators and the makers of policy struggle not only to define it, but decide how best to approach change. Such renewed federal commitment to higher K-12 standards of education has meant students are now required to pass state-mandated exams. Under this law, schools with poorly-performing students are given five years to demonstrate considerable levels of progress. Failure to do this will result in an obligatory restructuring of the system (2002).

Given this, many school districts have extended a hand to for-profit education providers. Still others have elected to engage Educational Provider Organizations (EPOs) as a means to quickly meet new state requirements. Philadelphia in particular has captured the nation’s attention by approaching school reform in an ambitious, aggressive manner. John Chubb, chief education officer of the private EPO Edison Schools has explained the need for reform in this city by saying:

“Roughly 60 percent of Philadelphia’s students failed the state’s reading and math exams, and more than a third dropped out of high school. Three-fourths of the city’s schools are identified as low performing, meaning that more than half of a given school’s students are failing” (Chubb, 2002, par. 3).

Last spring, Philadelphia’s School Reform Commission (SRC) decided to privatize 75 of the 240 schools in the city (Chubb, 2002). It has been difficult to determine what, if any, impact such change has had on student achievement. The demand for critical outcomes-assessment remains, as little work has been conducted to determine what has worked both within the district, and at the individual school-level. The initial large-scale push to privatize education in Philadelphia has called into question the shifting definition of public education. Maia Cucchiara asked in a recent article what the

“public purposes of education” have become, wondering whether the “expectation that schools will prepare students to be knowledgeable, competent, responsible citizens” can persist within the context of such privatized “public” schools (Cucchiara, 2003, par. 5).

Indeed school reform and the integration of service learning into education systems are often regarded as separate movements. This is unfortunate as service learning can offer value in the revitalization of school systems. Sarah Pearson (2002, p. 56) writes:

“Service learning is a powerful tool for reaching both the academic and social objectives of education. It has the potential to reinvigorate the education reform movement by encouraging the creation of a caring community of students to improve the school’s culture and possibly impact our world.”

By fostering intellectual and emotional development, service learning can offer schools an effective, creative means to promote student success—the cornerstone of school reform efforts. As Parker-Gwin and Mabry have emphasized, the “two primary goals of service learning for students are positive civic and academic outcomes” (1998). Given this, it seems sensible to engage service learning as a tool toward achieving lasting school reform.

An important slice of the literature on school reform highlights the success “small schools” have in retaining students, and in successfully promoting learning and academic achievement (Fine and Somerville, 1998; Cotton, 2001). Yet when operating with limited resources, the creation of such optimal small learning communities becomes difficult. Students in urban school settings, who might benefit from having more individualized attention from teachers, are often in larger classrooms and may not be receiving it. In the two sections that follow, we explain why we think service learning may help remedy this and other ills that affect the urban public school.

Creating an Enabling Learning Environment

Developing lesson plans for K-12 students that not only teach critical material, but provide real-world application, build character, and encourage civic engagement can prove challenging to educators. Service learning offers a tangible, powerful link between abstract theory and participatory, active learning (see Appendix B for an example of a second grade lesson plan that was used in this study). Janet Mason of the University of

South Carolina believes service learning acts as a tool particularly useful for involving the “reluctant learner” who might be detached from the learning process (as cited in Pearson, 2002). One Alexander Wilson Elementary School student offers testament to this saying:

“I appreciate the students coming to our classroom. I had a lot of fun making the friendship bracelets. Our group made the coolest jump rope rhyme. I can’t wait til the next time you come. I promise to do my homework. Will you come back soon?”

Another Wilson student, in a reflection letter to the Penn and FLC course participants decided that: “This was the most fun class I ever had. I wish we could do this all the time. Will you come and visit again?”

The encouragement of learning by engaging students and promoting “fun” seems to have been successful in this case. A second grade teacher at Wilson expands on this by writing: “The partnership with Penn has been a highlight of my school year. My students get so excited when the high school and college students come to my classroom to supplement our curriculum. It really encourages my students to think critically about subject matter and motivates them to work harder. The high school and college participants have been great role models for my students. It is thrilling to see the excitement in my students’ eyes when the Penn and FLC students walk through the door!”

The Penn students involved in the course expressed similar views. Many felt the class helped not only educate, but inspire and encourage their action. One Penn sophomore indicates that this course has encouraged her to seriously considering a career in teaching. She explains: “I think this class brought to light issues with education I was privileged enough to ignore. I went to a private school...[so] finding out about it really affected me.”

Other Penn students also felt this class helped not only teach them about inequalities in the education system, but also stirred in them a desire to help. As one young man indicated during the Penn focus group session: “This is the first class I’ve had where there’s been a lot of outside interaction and interaction outside of textbooks. I thought it was cool to have students come in and bring a completely new perspective.”

It seems that for young and older students alike, the service learning approach to teaching has had its benefits. Course participants have indicated feeling actively engaged with the material they are learning, in part because of the hands-on approach the instructor has taken, and in part because the classroom has provided a safe space for meaningful student-to-student interaction and dialogue.

“Motivated” Students, Their Personal Growth and Changing Perspectives

Throughout the course, enrolled students were asked to use “reflection paper” assignments as a tool to provide periodic feedback on the classroom experience. Notably, the Franklin Learning Center students detailed reaching new levels of self-awareness and understanding as a result of having taken the course. One student wrote:

“What I’ve learned about myself...I learned that I’m not [dis]organized as I seem and that when my partners needed help, I didn’t take them down like I thought I would. I’ve become pretty good at working in a team. I know this is important for college courses so I’ll keep working at it.”

Other students expressed similar sentiments, with many suggesting this course offered them a glimpse into higher education-learning. As one student explained:

“I learned I should participate more and ask questions more often. I also learned that, if I ever do a group project again, I should be more organized. Taking a college class really has helped me think about what I need to do to be a good student.”

The FLC students then, appear to have come away from the course with heightened levels of personal motivation, and with a collective sense of how to succeed in an advanced course setting. Having shared classroom space with Penn undergraduates seems to have both challenged and encouraged the FLC students. As one student explained in a reflection paper entry:

“I was really nervous to be in a class with Penn students. At first I was like, ‘they are going to be so much smarter than me.’ But I realized that I am smart too and I can do things just like them.”

Still others spoke of building their confidence levels and learning how to be more assertive in the classroom. As one FLC student explained: “From doing presentations and group work for this class, I learned that I have leadership qualities. I haven’t taken on lots

of leadership in school, but I think I can now.” Another wrote of becoming a better team player stating: “I learned that I’m able to work with people I don’t know at first. Usually during a group project I work with my friends.”

One young man wrote encouragingly that although this class “was the hardest course I ever took, I think that if I can do this class, I can do anything.” The FLC students, while initially reserved and somewhat intimidated by the Penn students, appear to have completed the class with a renewed sense of intellectual confidence. They seem to have assumed a considerable level of final project ownership. One Franklin student described his assignment by saying: “I think this research was the hardest research I have ever done. It required many parts and a lot of work. It took up lots of my time but I think it will (lead to) better things in the future.”

At the end of the spring semester, all course enrollees were asked to describe their experience in the class. Within the context of two separate focus groups – one for the Franklin Learning Center high school students and another for the Penn students – participants indicated having gained an appreciation for Asian American history and an awareness of difficulties troubling the population throughout that history. One FLC student explained: “I never really noticed these issues as serious issues. They didn’t appear to be as open to me as they are now, since I’ve done research on this.”

Importantly, Penn students also spoke of change and personal growth as being outcomes of having completed the course. The Penn students’ motivations for enrolling in “Asian American Community Fieldwork in Urban Education” appear to have been multiple. For many, the opportunity to expand one’s viewpoint beyond, in the words of one young woman, “the Penn bubble” was valued. As one student indicated:

“I think this course made me realize a lot about my own background. The Asian Americans I grew up with...all came from pretty strong academic backgrounds [and]...all went to Harvard, MIT and Penn.... Going out to these schools in the Philadelphia school district you realize the big disparity between the opportunities available to these students and you...want to reach back out and give [them] an opportunity.”

This sentiment was reiterated by most participants of this session, the desire to “give back” to young members of the Asian American community being expressed strongly. Further, a few Penn respondents indicated this course offered them a view

beyond what their other courses could. Many students of business, engineering, and biology suggested they came to this course looking for insight into the lives of local area Asian American youth. As one young sophomore business major explained:

“This is the first class I’ve had where there’s been a lot of outside interaction...outside of textbooks. [I hoped to] learn about Asian Americans in actual society, in the education system...[and] to learn about my fellow Asian Americans.”

An encouraging number of these students have come away from the class reinvested in helping larger communities they feel a part of. As one young woman noted:

“I’m in Wharton right now, but I’m interested in education. This course made me realize it is really important to me...to somehow...stay involved in helping the underprivileged members of the Asian American community.”

An upperclassman echoed this sentiment, saying:

“I was thinking I might actually switch my career. I studied management so I was thinking more banking, but now I’ll probably become a teacher.”

Penn students discussed acquiring a new sensitivity and strength of conviction around the notion that members of underserved youth communities should be afforded more opportunities from the community at large. Importantly, the course appears to have reinforced this conviction, and coupled it with a sense of the necessity for individual action. One sophomore woman explained:

“Now I have a stronger inclination to want to do something whereas before I was like ‘Yeah, there’s something wrong, yeah it needs to be fixed.’ [Before] I never really wanted to take an initiative to do anything about it.”

The Franklin Learning Center students also indicated having gained awareness about not only Asian Americans, but other minority communities as well. As one young woman explained, “We didn’t only focus on Asian American studies. It made us think wider. It’s not just us, other races have problems too.” Another FLC student expressed a similar sentiment in a course reflection paper, writing:

“I noticed that when I was in class, I learned all different words and meanings and I understand more about Asian American Studies. I never realized that things affected us like that. During this course, I realized that learning with different ethnic backgrounds for me is interesting.”

In this sense, the FLC students appear to have gained a depth and sensitivity around cross-cultural histories. Over the course of the semester, these students have acquired a greater sense of intellectual confidence, assertiveness in the classroom, and awareness around what it takes to succeed in a college level class. They have been challenged and encouraged by the Penn students with whom they have shared a classroom, sometimes taking the collegians as role models. All indicate they have grown personally, learning about hidden leadership skills, for instance, and how to function effectively in a team setting.

Similarly, the Penn undergraduate course participants describe having attained a renewed sense of commitment to community service, and, specifically, to the resolution of issues that hinder Asian American student achievement within some urban school contexts. These older students indicate leaving the class with a sense of urgency around resolving these issues, and, importantly, a belief that they can be agents of change.

Summary

This study reports preliminary findings that indicate that service learning participants benefited from a more enabling learning environment. We suggest that the participants were motivated both in an academic and personal sense through the service learning activities. A primary goal of school reform efforts is to deepen students' learning by fostering intellectual and emotional development. The service learning project discussed in this paper has served as an effective mechanism through which three institutions, and their shared community, have managed to promote the goals of Philadelphia's school reform effort.

We feel there is much that can be gained from the incorporation of service learning into both K-12 and higher education curricula. By bridging theory and practice, service learning can promote better schooling opportunities through the boosting of academic, social and civic learning outcomes. Beyond this, we believe such efforts will help foster a brand of "cross-ethnic/racial" pollination and understanding. Action-based interactive learning can tighten the gap currently separating racial groups—importantly the one dividing local area African and Asian American students. The need is great now,

perhaps more than ever, for service learning to become an integrated, accepted part of the curricula. We believe it can provide an effective, critical connection between students, schools, educators, and the community.

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Appendix A

College Student Focus Group Questions

Opening Question (Round Robin):

Please tell me your name, year, major, and hometown, and if you have ever taken any Asian American Studies courses.

Introductory Questions:

Sentence Completion (Round Robin):

I became involved in this course because....

What did you hope to learn or achieve through participation in the course or program?

Did you accomplish these goals? Please explain.

Transition Questions:

What have you learned about yourself since becoming involved in the program?

What have you learned about others (the community, other people, etc.)?

Did the experience have any effect on your future plans? For example, did it have an effect on your choice of major, career, or decision to attend grad school? (*Has it helped you clarify your decision or made you change your mind?*)

Please describe your experience working as a team (small group or entire class). What have you learned from the team/group experience?

Key Questions:

Has participation in this course or program impacted or changed your life? If so, how?

Were any situations/activities that you felt were too difficult to handle?

What have been some of the highlights/low lights of this program?

What are some barriers or problems that you have experienced while in the program?

How would you improve the program in the future?

Would you recommend the program to your friends? Why or why not?

Would you do the program again? If so, what might you do differently, what might you do the same?

Final Question:

Do you have any additional comments or reflections on your experience that you would like to add?

High School Student Focus Group Questions

Opening Question (Round Robin):

Please tell me your name and year in school.

Introductory Questions:

Sentence Completion (Round Robin):

I became involved in this course because....

What did you hope to learn or achieve through participation in the course or program?

Did you accomplish these goals? Please explain.

Transition Questions:

What have you learned about yourself since becoming involved in the program?

What have you learned about others (the community, other people, etc.)?

Did the experience have any effect on your future plans? For example, did it have an effect on your decision to attend college or future career plans? (*Has it helped you clarify your decision or made you change your mind?*)

Please describe your experience working as a team (small group or entire class). What have you learned from the team/group experience?

Key Questions:

Has participation in this course or program impacted or changed your life? If so, how?

Were any situations/activities that you felt were too difficult to handle?

What have been some of the highlights/low lights of this program?

What are some barriers or problems that you have experienced while in the program?

How would you improve the program in the future?

Would you recommend the program to your friends? Why or why not?

Would you do the program again? If so, what might you do differently, what might you do the same?

Final Question:

Do you have any additional comments or reflections on your experience that you would like to add?

Appendix B

Sample Lesson Plan

- Engage: Activate prior knowledge by asking students to tell you what they remember from the children's book *Halmoni and the Picnic*.
- Discuss the ways that children in the story worked together.
- Ask them what it means to cooperate.
- Help them to understand that cooperation is an important part of friendship.
- Tell students that today they are going to work together in a group and create a jump rope chant.

- Remind them that it is important to listen to everyone’s ideas.
- Ask a volunteer from each group to write down the chant.
- Practice the chant while jump roping.
- Share the chant with the class while jump roping.
- Encourage students to show respect for the different chants and to listen for the different qualities of friendship.
- Safety Tips: Be sure to remind them not to push and shove when jumping.

Closure:

Teamwork:

Have students discuss what they learned about working together. Talk about the advantages of working together.

Maintaining Friendship:

Students can be encouraged to write thank you notes to the college students as a way to maintain friendship. Students can use a semantic web to brainstorm qualities they liked about their college student partners.

Discussion suggestions:

Identify strategies to help maintain friendships.

What did you give to your new friendship, and what did you receive?

Is it difficult to make friends who are different from you (i.e. age, race, ethnicity, primary language, religion, etc.)?

What are the benefits of making friends who are different from you?

The teacher will remind participants that they will be taking a fieldtrip to a local ethnic community during the next session. The teacher will emphasize that friends can be made from any community and that the local ethnic community they will be visiting is a community with people that might have different cultures, but they can still be great friends.

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