

Creating a Successful Psychology Service Learning Philanthropy Course

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of a pilot program involving psychology courses that employ service learning as an impetus for content mastery and student philanthropy. The program is modeled after the Northern Kentucky University Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project, the premise of which is to allow students to identify community wants through the integration of service and academic content and act on the observed needs.

Introduction

Having entered our respective fields convinced of the value residing within them and sporting a well-developed understanding of their applicability, academicians are often chagrined to discover that students may not share an abiding love of the materials introduced, in part because the relevance may not be readily apprehended. Key actors in Harvard's Project Zero noted that although "the acquisition and retention of knowledge certainly serve important purposes, knowledge does not come into its own until the learner can deploy it with understanding" (Perkins & Unger, 1999, p. 18). Thus, effectively demonstrating how theoretical concepts and principles apply to the real world is not only an estimable goal for educational professionals, it is crucial to the intellectual and civic development of their students. Instructors have the ability to empower students to maximize their academic experience when students proficiently apply key disciplinary concepts to their individual lives and larger social issues. A course that promoted "real world applicability" while simultaneously encouraging a sense of civic responsibility would be idyllic, and psychology is a discipline well-positioned to achieve these ends.

Facilitating student civic responsibility is a dominant didactic perspective and has earned respect in the academic community. Growing national concern with a lack of civic responsibility, and a prevailing sense that Americans are "drawing back from involvements with community affairs and politics," (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999, p.2) has raised the issue to a greater level of importance. "Civic responsibility – addressing social problems in an informed, committed, and positive manner – is not an intuitive process" (Constitutional Rights Foundation (CRF), 2000). In order for young people to participate effectively in a democracy, they should understand their community and its establishments. Consistently emphasized in psychology courses, critical thinking is vital for students to help them form perceptive decision-making, "to learn the ins and outs of public policy, and to understand the value of service," (CRF, 2000).

Service learning is defined as a “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) and is considered a mainstream teaching approach. Typically, students engage in involvement in community agencies, usually nonprofit, social service organizations, which afford learning opportunities alongside service experiences. Students are then challenged to integrate their service observations with course concepts.

The Psychology Service Learning Philanthropy course at Collin was developed in an attempt to meet the aforementioned idealistic pedagogical initiatives. Based on a successful model, the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project housed in the Scripps Howard Center at Northern Kentucky University, this program was constructed with service learning as a required component.

Background

The Northern Kentucky University (NKU) Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project was developed in 1999, by the shared passions of the Mayerson Foundation President, Dr. Neal Mayerson and Northern Kentucky University President, Dr. James C. Votruba. The two men wanted to find ways to “foster civic responsibility and engagement among college students” (Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project). The Mayerson family funded the program, which sought to integrate “philanthropy into the college curriculum with the hope of advancing the development of competent student-citizens who seek to play vital roles in their community and who are committed to the pursuit of the common good” (MSPP).

The project navigated early hurdles, such as a dearth of resources for this teaching method. A committee comprised of seven faculty from NKU designed the curriculum, which contains parameters that continue to distinguish the project. The basic structure involves the designation of five to seven courses each semester in which faculty from “all disciplines can participate in the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project” (MSPP). Each designated course receives \$4,000 “to invest in community organizations with 501(c)(3) designations” (MSPP). Classes should emphasize meaningful engagement with classmates and nonprofit organizational leaders. Within the context of the course, participating students should form “community boards (small work groups)” and must ascertain a need of their community. Other criteria include answering 7 reflection questions, evaluating and issuing Requests for Funding Proposals (RFPs) and utilizing a collective decision-making procedure to award the \$4,000 to the selected agency. Other suggestions reflect individual course objectives, for example, faculty may have students submit a funding proposal to the class “on behalf of a 501(c)(3) organization.” Students may also opt to “volunteer at a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, study the history of philanthropy and nonprofits, explore careers in the nonprofit sector, or fundraise to find additional funds” (MSPP). The Psychology Service Learning Philanthropy Course at Collin County Community College (CCCCD) was created using the Mayerson Student Philanthropy course as a key model.

As in the Mayerson model, the Psychology Department at CCCCD proposed the development of a small set of class sections that would utilize service learning as a required course component. While the primary course objectives would continue to be met, these sections were designed around an integration of service learning pedagogy and psychology curricula. Through the program funding, it was anticipated that students would identify and act on community needs. Philanthropic action was to be predicated on a thorough evaluation of critical wants in the community and based upon a clear and demonstrated understanding of course material and the application of such to concrete social issues. Also as in the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project, the Collin initiative had many challenges to overcome in development; from acquisition of funds to implementation of the program. Course resources were particularly scarce, as all disciplines are invited to participate in the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project, yet no psychology course materials were readily available for review.

Purpose

The purpose of this program is to afford students an opportunity to make meaningful connections between course curriculum and the larger social environment through active civic engagement. In accordance with the goal of all service learning involvement, it is anticipated that students will develop a fuller understanding of their place in the social structure, and meaningfully connect the social issues of their community with civic responsibility. It is further proposed that the structure of these courses will heighten service learning experiences by allowing students to see firsthand the intricacies and difficulties of engendering public interest sufficient to economically sustain nonprofit programs.

Funding

The CCCCD Psychology Department maintains a fund derived from the royalties of self-published lab manuals. Following an overview of the NKU program, it was the consensus of departmental faculty that using funds received from student educational costs in support of a program designed to enhance learning and social responsibility among students themselves represented an appropriate expenditure. A pilot program was approved that allowed four grants of \$1,000.00 each based on faculty proposals.

Implementation

Four courses were selected to implement this program and two are discussed here. As part of the research curriculum already present in psychology courses, students were instructed in grant writing. Students were then organized, with assistance by the faculty, into service learning placements. During the course of their classroom studies and outside service involvement, students determined community needs and identified ways in which limited funding could best serve these. Faculty were responsible for the specific implementation of the integrated course, as well as consulting with students to determine the manner in which the funds were to be disbursed to the nonprofit agencies.

The Introductory and Life Span Psychology Service Learning Philanthropy Courses

These courses were created with the primary goal of helping students grasp psychology while giving them something valuable to invest in their community. The courses focused on mastering core concepts, while concurrently facilitating civic awareness and teaching grant writing skills. Conducting service learning at a designated agency during the semester was a required component to the class.

Psychological theories and concepts were learned in class, while mostly outside of class, groups volunteered at their agencies and worked on assessing agency needs and preparing grant proposals to be presented to the class near semester's end. In one section, students constructed PowerPoint presentations and summary grant proposals, and in the other students wrote grant proposals for peer review, summary presentations, and individual reflection papers. Through a democratic process, the \$1,000 grants were awarded to the agency of their designation.

Again, developing mastery of core psychological concepts was the primary goal of the course, and course objectives mirrored those expectations. Course objectives included describing the basic theories of psychology and scientific methods used to study behavior and mental processes, and on relating these to the service experience. After becoming involved in the community, students were also expected to demonstrate an understanding of basic processes such as motivation, learning, personality, and human development. Service experiences also afforded students a concrete opportunity to realize a respect for cultural differences in human experience, and express how psychology is pertinent to every day life, particularly in addressing community needs thorough the application of psychological principles and philanthropy.

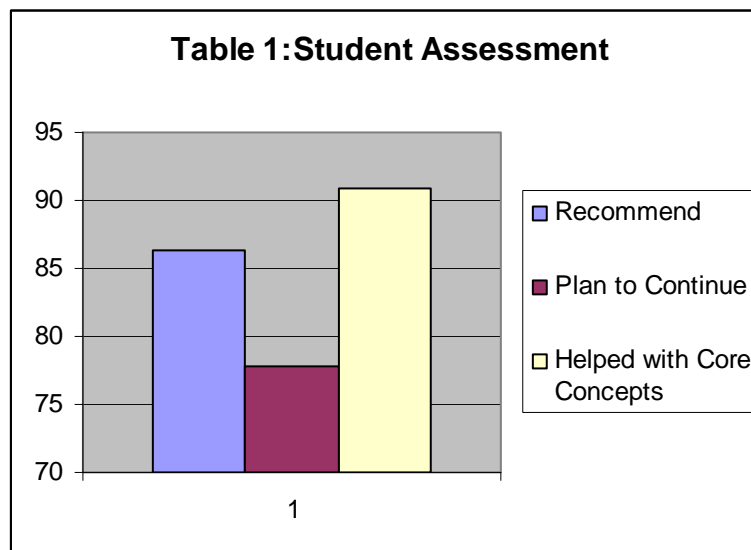
The courses were structured by either dividing students into workgroups, called Student Psychology Community Boards, comprised of three to four members, or allowing them to self-select into small groups. Instructors provided lists of agencies from which to choose, working specifically with agencies chosen for prior positive feedback with the service learning program and onsite grant writers who assisted students with proposals. Student Community Boards were then asked to designate an agency preference from the list provided and to convey their first, second, and third choices. Agency matches were based on group preferences and interest.

After students were divided into workgroups and assigned a community agency, they were instructed to keep a time log of their service performed during each week of the semester. In most groups, two hours per week were required, with more hours often being conducted by the students. Working both in groups, as well as individually, students identified their community agency needs. In one section, students demonstrated this in empirical and persuasive presentations in which they tried to sway the entire class to donate all of the \$1,000 to the agency of their designation. A democratic vote followed the presentations, with an agency "winner." A ceremony to bequeath the check was commenced at the end of the semester. In the other section, students reviewed all grant proposals and presentations, and democratically decided on disbursement, in this

case a divided distribution of funds among multiple agencies based on the itemized needs identified in the proposals.

Post Project Assessment

At the close of the semester, twenty-eight students in one section were given a post project assessment summary sheet. Students were asked how service learning helped with learning class concepts, and if they would recommend a course that required service learning. They were also queried on whether or not they planned to continue volunteering with their agencies. In the other section, students were asked to provide suggestions for improvement in future courses.



As noted in the graph above, student response to the course was very positive. When asked if they would recommend such a course, 86% of students indicated that they would, and over 77% responded that they planned to continue their agency work. Perhaps the most promising find was that over 90% maintained that the service learning component assisted them in meeting learning objectives for the course. As one student noted, “Service learning helped class concepts become connected to real life. I got the chance to witness what we were learning in class first hand.”

Providing a solid academic foundation was critical, so class sessions were primarily devoted to core concepts, while much of the service learning component, which included coordinating group assignments, was conducted outside of class. The lack of in-class time allocation was the primary student concern. Suggestions for improvement included: 1) expanding the amount of class time available for group work on the project, although students acknowledged the conflict this would create with reference to appropriate course coverage; 2) and the addition of a lab hour credit to courses designated as service learning; and 3) students suggested a coordinated public relations push to educate students generally on the availability of such courses for future recruitment.

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