

Inquiry, Insight and Civic Engagement: Re-visioning the Community-Based Service-Learning Project in Pre-Service Literacy Methods Courses

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Abstract

The rationale for integrating service-learning projects in pre-service teacher education is explored. Service-learning is identified as a vehicle for integrating inquiry-based instruction and as a context for practicing partnership development with families, schools and corporate stake-holders. Service-learning projects are also discussed as a source for increasing self-efficacy and confidence in pre-service teacher candidates. Four specific examples of community-based service-learning projects and their impact on pre-service teacher candidates enrolled in literacy methods courses at two private, northwestern colleges are presented.

Pre-Service Teacher Education and Service Learning: The How's and Why's

Why would it be important for pre-service teacher candidates to be involved in service-learning? Inquiry based instruction has repeatedly been found to increase participant engagement and ownership of learning. In methods based courses, it is often difficult to integrate inquiry-based instruction due to the need to master specific content and skills. However, higher education faculty at two private, northwest colleges recognized that pre-service teacher candidates who are able to actively engage in applying their learning in novel situations and to independently construct their own understanding of the reading process and factors that impact literacy development for children and families are more likely to be effective future practitioners. Therefore, time was spent actively examining ways to incorporate inquiry-based learning without sacrificing mastery of needed content. Service-learning experiences were quickly identified as a vehicle for addressing this need.

In the community where these two institutions are located, there is a clear need for identifying novel ways of partnering with families and corporate partners to facilitate literacy development. The target community for these service-learning projects includes several schools with high percentages of free and reduced lunch students (in one case 95% was the reported figure for 2004-05). In addition, the economic conditions of the community preclude many families from purchasing books for children or from having time to engage in literacy activities in the home due to the need to maintain multiple jobs per parent. The service-learning projects designed for these two colleges were an effort to address issues of social justice, community-family-school partnerships as well as fostering independence and increased self-efficacy in the pre-service teacher candidates who implemented the activities.

What is it?

Service learning can take many forms; what distinguishes it is its emphasis on active learning. There is a long history in education of emphasizing learning by doing or experiential learning (Dewey, 1937; Reich, 1994). Service learning at its best uses the academic curriculum as a basis for developing meaningful activities that address both community needs and service provider needs (Anderson, 1998). Vadenboncoeur and colleagues (1996) describe service learning as the application of course material to an immediate problem or community need and also see service learning as a vehicle to identify development of democratic or socially engaged teachers. Quezada and Christopherson (2005) suggest that service learning be used as a pedagogical technique for combining authentic community connection with integrated outcomes. Any form of service learning, to be effective, also requires the service experience to be processed and shared with peers to strengthen learning (Vadenboncoeur et al., 1996). Community service, the focus of this article, is one type of service learning based on providing assistance to individuals, organizations or the community-at-large (Anderson, 1998). Interestingly, most of the examples of service-learning in teacher education are school-based. Very few focus on providing service to the community outside of a school venue. The projects described in this article are examples of non-school based service-learning activities that can help to address this gap in the literature.

Principles of Good Practice:

Anderson (1999) identified several principles for effective service-learning programs. These include: aligning outcomes for service-learning with curricular goals and standards and ensuring service-learning programs are theoretically grounded in disciplinary knowledge. All stakeholders in the program should be included in its design, implementation and assessment and should have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. The program should include frequent and varied opportunities for service providers to engage in reflection. Finally, for pre-service teacher candidates, the recommendation is that the pedagogy of service-learning be explicitly taught in the hope that it will be utilized in the practice of these future educators.

Why do it?

Most of the literature on service learning touts the same benefits for the service providers, in this case pre-service teacher candidates. Such benefits include: increased commitment to democratic values and social justice; development of an ethic of service (defined as caring, respect, tolerance for difference, fairness, social responsibility and recognition of the value of community); improved ability to engage in reflective and critical thinking; and stronger problem-solving skills (Aguilera, 1995; Vadenboncoeur et al., 1996; Root, 1997; Vickers, Harris & McCarthy, 2004). For the service provider, the literature also notes the likelihood of increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, and a greater willingness to engage in leadership roles (Vadenboncoeur et al, 1996; Anderson, 1998). Some of the research suggests this may be due to the service learning experience

providing the pre-service teacher with a greater feeling of authority and validation than might be available through more traditional school-based practicum experiences (Wade, 1997).

For pre-service teacher candidates engaging in service learning, there appears to be improved ability to communicate with parents and to plan activities and development of a more positive view of community engagement (Anderson, 1998). Root (1997) also notes that service learning can be used to address community needs that might otherwise go unmet while also engaging pre-service teacher candidates in meaningful learning activities. On a more pragmatic level, many states now include community engagement as part of their standards for teacher certification (Performance-based Pedagogy Assessment, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for Washington State, 2005). The interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) standards has as one of its goals that the teacher will plan instruction based on knowledge of subject matter, students, the community and curricular goals. In another INTASC standard, the teacher is called upon to foster relationships with school colleagues, parents and community agencies to support students' learning and well-being. The inclusion of community in both of these goals reflects one purpose of engagement in service-learning (Anderson, 2000).

Finally, service-learning can be viewed as a form of scholarship (Boyer, 1996). Specifically, Boyer (1996) classifies service-learning as the scholarship of engagement and identifies four components for discussion. The scholarship of discovery recognizes service-learning as a vehicle for inquiry, invention and imagination. The scholarship of integration recognizes service-learning as a vehicle for increasing relevance of academic learning by providing expanded contexts for learning. Rather than see the curriculum as belonging to a specific course or discipline, the curriculum has the potential to be meaningful in many aspects of everyday life. The scholarship of teaching identifies service-learning as placing the participant, regardless of discipline, in the role of the teacher. In an effective service-learning program, the participant must utilize and share academic knowledge in the design, implementation and assessment of the project. This is the role of teacher and deepens both the participant's understanding of the content and his/her sense of authority over its utilization. The scholarship of application values the opportunity service-learning provides the participant to practice solving relevant and complex real-world problems through the application of academic content.

Our Programs

A possible benefit of service-learning not frequently noted in the literature is increased opportunity for professional practice. Blackwell (2003) addresses this when she discusses the issue of transfer. Blackwell argues that transfer of learning is facilitated when learning occurs in multiple contexts or through various forms of practice. Service-learning can provide extended contexts for practice for the pre-service teacher candidate. For most pre-service teacher candidates, the context for practice is a classroom setting and the time spent there is often limited to the requirements of a field experience during which they often work as classroom helpers and have little direct responsibility for the

learning of children and even less opportunity to interact with parents or to collaborate with other professionals. Service-learning opportunities can increase pre-service teacher confidence and self-efficacy by providing avenues for increased responsibility for the design, delivery and assessment of learning activities and by defining the recipients of the service in more broad terms to include the family or the community-at-large.

There are many ways the benefits of service learning can be harnessed for pre-service teachers. The projects described here reflect the initial attempts by two private institutions of higher learning to include service learning in their course curricula. These are ongoing projects that are continuing to develop in scope and sophistication.

The Family Book Night Project is a service-learning activity included in the course curriculum for an elementary education literacy methods course. Students in the course learn the significance of parental attitudes and involvement in early literacy acquisition and in the likelihood of academic success for a child's lifetime. Pre-service teacher candidates study obstacles to parental involvement and identify strategies for increasing parental engagement and positive attitudes toward schooling. Specifically, pre-service teacher candidates learn the particular challenges that low-income families often face in becoming involved in their child's academic achievement. These families may have fewer books and other resources for reading growth available in the home. The parents that head these households may have inadequate education to allow them to achieve higher paying jobs and to provide a variety of materials for modeling good literacy behavior in the home. Oftentimes, they are working very hard to survive and have less time and energy to read or talk with their children. Statistics show the results of these challenges on the academic lives of children. According to Head Start research (2005), roughly half of lower-income children starting first grade are up to two years behind their peers in preschool skills, have less exposure to books, and a more limited oral vocabulary. By kindergarten, middle to upper class children have experienced up to 1,700 hours of picture book reading while lower-income children have only experienced 25 hours of picture book reading on average. By first grade, these same children have a 5,000-word oral vocabulary versus the 20,000-word vocabulary of their more affluent peers. Looking at these statistics, it becomes very clear that failure to provide resources for these parents to help their children and to engage their interest in doing so is to consign these children to struggles throughout their academic lives. Indeed, low-income parents often have less contact with schools and teachers and need more support from the community-at-large to support their involvement in their children's education.

With this in mind, during the spring and the fall of 2005, at a northwestern private college, a School of Education partnered with a local Starbucks Coffee Company to create Family Book Nights. Once a month, a local Starbucks hosted the free event. During each Book Night, the elementary education pre-service teachers at this college selected a high quality children's trade book to read aloud to participants. The children were then led through a related arts and crafts project. The adult participants were given a packet of literacy activities created by the pre-service students and based on the highlighted book. The activities were multi-disciplinary and included a set of directions for parents and an explanation of purpose. During the event, participants were treated to

free hot chocolate or coffee and cookies by Starbucks employees. The employees helped facilitate the event by assisting with the art project. Finally, each child was given a free book of his or her choice to take home. The books were purchased using Scholastic book points that were accrued during the year from orders made by the college students. Books were selected following consultation by the parent or caregiver with the pre-service teacher candidate. The pre-service teacher candidates were able to offer advice and guidance with confidence and professionalism and frequently reported being surprised by how much they knew about children's books and matching books with specific readers. During 2005, particular attention was paid to using Starbucks branches near lower-income schools as sponsors for these events. For the twelve-month period of this pilot program, over 200 families in the area attended a Book Night.

This project provides a venue for pre-service teacher candidates to practice collaboration in fostering literacy development. As the pre-service teacher candidates gain confidence and experience in working with parents, they will increase their effectiveness with parents in their initial teaching years. This partnership provides opportunities for the pre-service teacher candidates to think about the needs of parents and to "plan for collaborating with families to support student learning" (Performance-based Pedagogy Assessment, 2005).

The Book Night Project is one of the three service projects emphasized in the elementary Literacy courses. Pre-service teacher candidates in these courses also have the opportunity to get involved in a children's book fair. Each spring, the pre-service teacher candidates are allowed to choose whether to hold a Scholastic Book Fair on the college campus. If they choose to do so, they also choose a recipient for their efforts. In the past, one group of students chose to buy children's books to furnish a classroom library for three grade levels of one low-income elementary school. This school has very limited resources for classroom libraries and many classrooms had books in very poor condition that were over twenty years old. The pre-service teacher candidates took leadership roles in marketing the event, visiting with school district offices to gain permission to post notices in school buildings, working with a campus office to secure approval for campus signage and learning to operate a cash register and credit card machine and maintain account records. They decided on staffing for the event and scheduled themselves into various time slots and they took responsibility for breaking down and setting up the event each day. At the end of four days, this group of students raised close to \$1,000 for the purchase of new books for their chosen school.

As a group, they solicited teacher input for book purchases and desired book sets for whole class and small group instruction. They did all the shopping and they personally delivered the books to the school and, in pairs, read a "new book" to classes of children in the building who would be the recipients of their purchases. The pre-service teacher candidates overwhelmingly rated this experience as one of the most empowering of their teacher education program and commented on how the experience of personally delivering the books and seeing the direct benefit of their efforts inspired them to continue to want to identify ways of making a difference in the lives of children.

This spring (2006), the current group of pre-service students has also chosen to do the book fair and will be using some of their profits to provide books to two area children's hospitals. They have learned of the unique needs of children's hospitals and programs for books. These organizations are frequently not able to accept used books or to keep books as part of a permanent collection due to concerns about contagion of illness. As a result, they are regularly in need of new books for children currently in the hospitals that can be sent home with them at the end of their stay. One of the two hospitals designated to receive books by this year's class of pre-service teacher candidates has specifically requested help in this area due to a shortfall in donated books from a holiday book drive. Again, the pre-service teachers have unanimously expressed enthusiasm for this project and excitement about being able to choose the recipients for their efforts. They have identified a community need and are using their knowledge and skills to collaborate with the community to meet that need. The process of planning the event and carrying it increases their confidence and their sense of efficacy in their own skills. They are also learning ways they can integrate service projects into their own future classrooms to make a difference in their local communities.

A final project for the pre-service teachers is the Writing Rally. The Writing Rally is in its twenty-third year. It is an annual event that brings up to seven hundred children and their families to the college campus each year to celebrate literacy. A noted children's author delivers a presentation to the children on writing or the power of imagination or avenues for inspiration. The children are then broken into common age groups and sent to classrooms where local teachers and master degree students volunteer to lead them and their parents or caregivers through writing exercises that culminate in the creation of an original book. The books are shared using author circle and the event ends with a punch and cookie reception to celebrate the young authors' accomplishments.

The pre-service teacher candidates work as classroom assistants or, in some cases, as surrogate parents at this event. Some children do not have an adult to take with them and the pre-service teacher candidates' stand-in for that adult. As session helpers, they prepare materials, help children with ideas and facilitate the interactions between the children and their "adult helper" or parent to be ensure that the experience is encouraging and positive for everyone. Each year, pre-service teacher candidates comment on the surprising degree of talent and ability displayed by the children in their groups. They have a new appreciation for what children can do when motivated. They also express surprise at many of the exchanges, positive and negative, that they witness between parents or adult caregivers and children. They recognize quickly how these exchanges can encourage or discourage children's efforts and have a new understanding of the significance of home and school partnerships and the power of verbal feedback to motivate. Many of these pre-service teacher candidates volunteer for this event multiple times during their four-years at the college and many go on to lead the writing sessions when they are qualified.

In the spring of 2004, the School of Education at a second northwestern private university supported the creation of a Saturday Literacy Tutoring program, in order to connect with the community at-large. This program uses pre-service teacher candidates as

the volunteer tutors. The students in the elementary literacy methods course tutor in the program as a requirement for a service learning assignment in the course. Again, this requirement supported that notion that the pre-service teacher candidates would have an experience in which to apply the content they were learning in class. The tutoring program was started to provide no cost literacy tutoring for children from low income areas in the city. These parents wanted help for their children but were unable to pay for private tutoring or commercial tutoring programs. The program ran for an hour and half on each Saturday during the fall and spring semesters. Many of the children participating in the program attended schools that have reduced or free lunch programs. The children in the literacy tutoring program are in second grade through high school. The tutors work one-on-one with the children to improve their literacy skills. Many of the children come to the program because they are having difficulty in their classes and the parents want help to improve to children's skills in literacy. This was a situation that the university was able to serve a need in the community and create a partnership with parents and children in the community surrounding this university. The parents brought their children to the university for tutoring and provided the children with the chance to envision themselves as future college attendees.

The pre-service teacher candidates in the elementary literacy methods course use this opportunity to apply the strategies and knowledge that they are learning in their course to the tutoring situation. This course is early in their certification program and provides a chance for the candidates to tutor a child who is having difficulty literacy skills in school. As a requirement of the service learning experience, the pre-service candidates are asked to reflect on their individual tutoring assignments. Through this reflection the candidates have said that they felt that they had a better understanding of the skills and strategies that they were learning in their literacy methods course. They also commented that they felt better prepared to work with children in their future field experiences and student teaching. This service learning project supports a need in the community and provides an initial experience for pre-service candidates to increase their knowledge of literacy development.

Reflection on Experience

As pre-service teacher candidates become involved in service learning assignments there is an expectation that they will reflect on the experience in a number of ways. Reflection during this experience is the difference between volunteering and service learning. It is "grounded in real-life roles, contexts and performances." (Toole and Toole, 1995) There are many types of reflective activities that can be completed by the candidates. They can keep journals, organize discussion groups to share service learning experiences, or prepare reports to demonstrate learning. Pre-service candidates are involved in reflection before, during and/or after doing service learning. The before portion of the reflection relates to the decision to choose from a variety of possible service experiences participants will be able to reflect on the kind of community service that they would like to be involved. From this type of reflection, the instructor is able to examine the candidates' attitudes toward the potential service project. This can provide

the organizer of the experience with some information about the commitment on the part of the pre-service candidate with the service project being considered.

Reflection during service connects the experience with the course that the participants are enrolled. This is the “what” and “so what” stage of service learning (Toole and Toole, 1995). The candidates can share their experiences, problem solve issues, and offer encouragement to other participants in the project. This is the time when participants in the service reflect on the connection to the community being served and understanding the effect the service has on that community.

The after experience reflection provides the participant with time to think about their experience and what service learning has meant to the community that they provided the service. They can make sense of the experience in connection to the course content. The reflection includes the participant’s understanding of the ethic of service and ability to relate to a real life experience. The outcome of the service learning should help the participant to understand the connection of the strategies and skills learned in a classroom situation to the community situation in which the service has taken place.

In the service learning experiences described in this article the pre-service teacher candidates were required to participate in community projects that had already been formed, so they did not go through the before stage of reflection. Rather the pre-service teacher candidates in the literacy tutoring program evaluated their situation after each tutoring session and then were asked to reflect on the entire experience at the end of the semester. The reflection that the candidates wrote at the end of the semester included their frustration with working with a child that learning difficulties, children who don’t come to tutoring because the parent forgot or the child that just stops coming in the middle of the experience because there is something else the child wants to become involved in and the parent didn’t see the need to complete the program. This service learning experience happened early in their college certification curriculum the teacher candidates have not had a chance to experience a whole classroom field experience yet. They did feel that the strategies they were learning in their course did support the tutoring they were doing one-on-one. They also reflected on the requirements it take to teach in a school classroom versus tutoring one child. The reflections turned in by the pre-service teacher candidates were a beginning point for them to understand the importance of knowing the community that they will eventually work and how their connection of the community could affect the learning of their future students.

Self-evaluation questionnaires are another tool utilized to encourage processing of the service-learning experience. These questionnaires prompt the pre-service teacher candidate to identify the strengths they brought to the project and the impact of the project on their sense of self-efficacy in teaching. Pre-service teacher candidates who led Book Night events during 2005 had many positive things to say about their experience. Several commented that they acquired a better idea of how to develop materials for parents to use at home to strengthen home and school partnerships. Several made mention that the process of putting together the activity packet helped them to recognize the degree of specificity required when sending home work for parents. Several made

comments such as this one: “I realize now that small things such as this event can make a big difference in people’s lives. It is important to give your knowledge to others and they share their attention and enthusiasm with you – everyone benefits” (Session leader 2, 2005). Other pre-service teacher candidates stated they learned that by developing community partnerships with local businesses and service groups, there is an opportunity to provide resources for families that might be outside the realm of what one teacher could do alone. One session leader stated that he had visited the Starbucks website after the event to learn how he could create partnerships for his own future classroom. This same session leader summed up the purpose of the Book Night projects well when he said:

I think it is important to participate in the community whether or not the kids attending go to my school. It is through events like these that some children get hooked on books and reading. This event let me reach out to the community and provide an example that some time and effort can make a big difference in the lives of others. (Session leader 3, 2005)

Taken together, this continuum of service learning opportunities provides the pre-service teacher candidate with a variety of avenues to develop professional competence, personal efficacy and confidence, improved interpersonal skills and stronger leadership and organizational skills. These experiences compliment what the pre-service teacher candidates are learning in their courses and expand their contexts for practice to enrich their learning.

The inquiry-based experience provided pre-service teacher candidates with insight into effective practices for partnering with community members, family, schools and corporate entities invested in the community’s well-being. Through reflection, these candidates were able to articulate the significance of their course work to their future professional practice. The unique contribution of these projects is their outreach efforts outside of the typical school-based venues. In the case of the featured projects, pre-service teacher candidates were not placed in the comfortable and familiar world of a public school classroom for their service-learning; instead, they were encouraged to transfer their knowledge and skills to novel situations that truly required partnering with all stake-holders in the community. This type of relationship and conceptualization of service-learning in teacher education warrants further study through the creation of novel projects and research questions and designs.

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