

Service Learning in Human Service Classes: Leading Student's Success

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Abstract

Service Learning is a form of application learning that applies what the students learned in the classroom to the real world in the context of a community service project. In recent years, Service Learning has been included in many academic disciplines throughout the United States. Most often these service-learning activities need students to use more than what they learned in the classroom to apply critical thinking on the real world cases. This requires the faculty to work on establishing community relationships to develop service-learning projects for relevant courses, site deputies to work closely with the professor and students, and students' passion to apply theory to practice. This paper used the Ecological Model and demonstrates Service Learning designs for four human service classes at The University of Akron to help students' success.

The Importance and Significance of Service Learning

Service Learning is a form of application learning that applies what the students learned in the classroom to the real world in the context of a community service project; alternatively, it is a form of education where students participate in a variety of activities that combines what was learned in the classroom with community service projects [4]. Research on Service Learning indicates that it increases student attendance, promotes academic knowledge and skills, fosters personal development among students, promotes civic responsibility, increases community-school linkages and yields valuable benefits to the community [2]. Institutions that use Service Learning can measure the overall productivity of their academic program by viewing how well their students apply the knowledge they learned in the class out in the community. If the students are performing below par, then, the institution needs to re-evaluate their practice methods and search for more empirically and evidence-based practice methods to include in their curriculum. Service Learning uses the experiences that the students have to advance current curriculum and show results for their program.

Creating avenues for students to express what they have learned allows for evaluators to monitor progress of the students and to determine the competence of those students. By determining best practices, faculty are equipping the students with the necessary tools to actively contribute to the community and preparing them for a future as professionals. Service Learning is important because it provides a hands-on experience. Sitting in a class is important, but how students learn to truly utilize that information in real life is even more important. Thus, Service Learning acts as the gateway between school and a future career. By having a hands-on experience, students learn what is needed for real life. Through Service Learning students have the opportunity to experience one or more fields of interest and may find the area that they would want to pursue in the future. Service Learning is essential because it shows students how to prepare for a career after school. Through their service in the community, they can learn from mistakes early on and adjust to practice effectively.

Service Learning also teaches faculty and staff how to best present information and curriculum in schools. By learning how students conduct themselves in the community, faculty can shape their curriculum to better attend to the needs of the students and the community.

Institutions can also learn more about the services in their communities by allowing students to partake in Service Learning. Service Learning can help to teach students the expectations and demands of the professional world. Through the effective use of Service Learning, students learn effective skills and strategies that will benefit them after school and in their future careers.

Course designs

In the past twenty years, human service and social work has been increasingly using an ecological approach. This approach integrates individuals and their physical and social environments in which “Human beings are viewed as developing through transitions with all elements of their environments” [3]. The Ecological Model explores both internal and external factors, as it views an individual as a dynamic and reciprocal interactor with his/her environments.

One important emphasis of the Ecological Model is on the person-in-environment [3]. As show in Figure 1, people live in an environment with many subsystems. With this conceptualization, according to Zastrow, human service demonstrates three focus areas:

- 1) The person (in the center) develops his/her problem solving, coping and development skills.
- 2) The relationship between the person and his/her subsystems around, which will link the person with needed resources or knowledge of services and opportunities.
- 3) The environment/subsystems to seek improvement to meet the needs of the individuals more effectively.

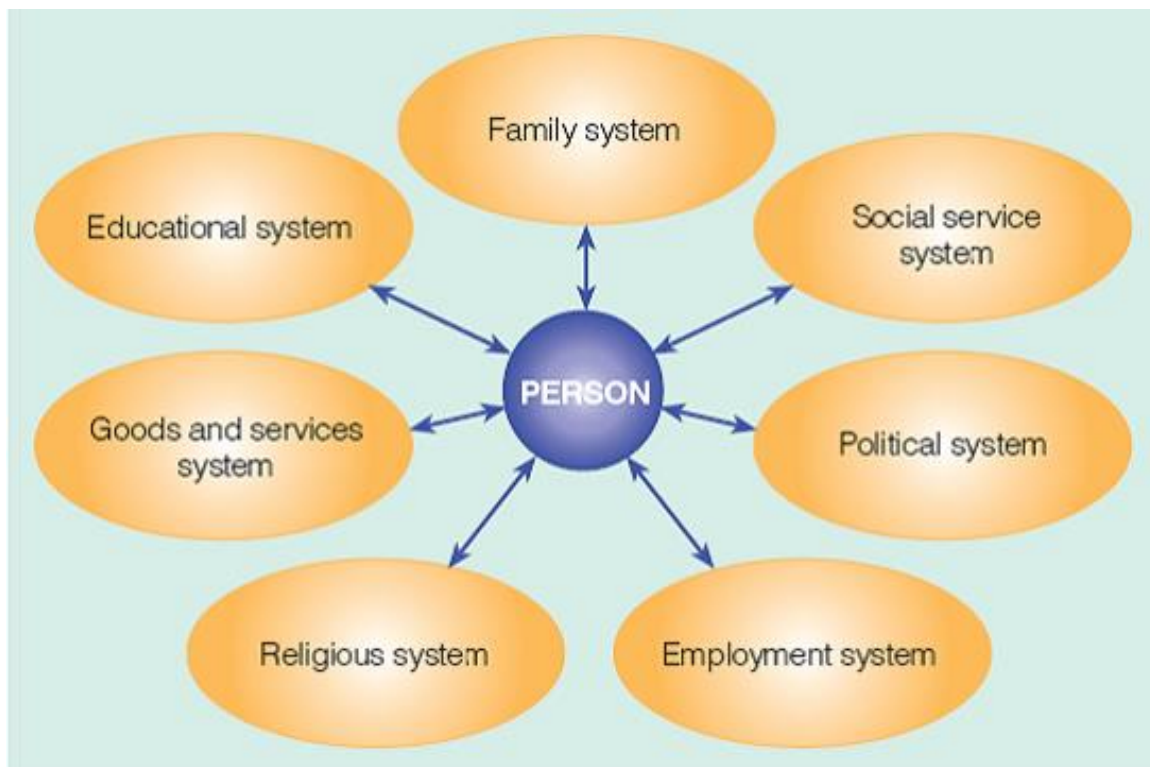


Figure 1: Ecological Model (P49, *Introduction to social work and social welfare*, Zastrow, (2013)).

In the most recent six years at the School of Family and Consumer Sciences and the School of Social Work, The University of Akron, four classes were designed with service learning. These classes were Family Life Management, Family Financial Management, Introduction to Social Welfare, and Social Policy Analysis for Social Workers. The basic theories in common in these four classes were family system theory and human development theory and economic theory. The professor of the classes used the Ecological Model (See Figure 1) and established six sites at the community, which are located from 0.1 mile to 3.5 miles from the campus. Each site has a responsible deputy to schedule student service, supervise the students, and at the end of each semester, document the student service hours and provide a record for grading. After each semester, the professor and the site deputies hold a meeting to discuss the syllabus, review what has been done, and plan for improvements. During the semester when students do their service learning, students are advised to write journals to record the time they start and finish, describe their activities and what they used from the course, discuss what they need to find out in order to solve the real life problems, and explain the effect they bring to their clients. Students are also asked to complete an evaluation form regarding their Service Learning experience, and provide feedback for improvements for future classes.

Table 1 showed service-learning data of Academic Year 2012-2013 at The University of Akron. 371 classes were involved in service learning, 136 faculty members taught Service Learning courses, and 7723 students participated in service-learning courses.

Four classes in human services at the School of Family and Consumer Sciences and the School of Social Work at The University of Akron between 2010 and 2014 used service learning. They were Family Life Management, Family Financial Management, Introduction to Social Welfare, and Social Policy Analysis for Social Workers. Table 2 showed the semesters and year each class was offered, student number registered for the class, whether required or voluntary for Service Learning, percentage of students reported positive experience with Service Learning, and percentage of participants who expressed intention to return to do service after the class.

Table 1: Service-learning data of Academic Year 2012-2013 at The University of Akron

Number of service learning courses	371
Number of departments represented by service learning courses	46
Number of faculty who taught service learning courses	136
Number of students participating in service learning courses	7,723

Note: Data from Institute of Teaching and Learning, University of Akron

Family Life Management class was the first class designed for Service Learning by the author in Spring Semester 2010, and repeated in Spring Semester 2012. The number of students registered for the classes was 24 and 20, respectively. Service Learning was required for five hours. Over 90% of students expressed positive experiences with Service Learning, and over 50% students expressed return to do service after the class (See Table 2).

Family Financial Management with Service Learning was offered by the author in Spring, 2012. Service Learning was required for five hours. The number of students registered for the classes was 32. In Fall 2013, the class was offered on line, therefore Service Learning was offered as a voluntary opportunity with

maximum of ten hours for extra credit (2 extra points for each hour). Over 91% of students expressed positive experiences with Service Learning, and 63% and 76% of the participants expressed return to do service after the class respectively (See Table 2).

Introduction to Social Welfare class was offered with Service Learning in Summer 2013 and Spring 2014. Service Learning was offered as a voluntary opportunity with maximum of ten hours for extra credit (2 extra points for each hour). 17 and 64 students registered for the class respectively, while 15 and 30 students participated in the Service Learning, respectively. At least 80% of the participants reported positive experiences with Service Learning, and at least 66% of the participants expressed return to do service after the class (See Table 2).

Table 2: Service-learning data for four classes in human service at The University of Akron

Class name	Semester /year	# in class	Required /voluntary (#)	% reported positive experiences	% expressed return after class
Family Life Management	Spring/2010	24	R	92	50
	Spring/2012	20	R	90	60
Family Financial Management	Spring/2012	32	R	91	63
	Fall/2013	23	V-13	92	76
Introduction to Social Welfare	Summer/2013	17	V-15	80	66
	Spring/2014	64	V-30	93	67
Social Policy Analysis	Fall/2012	20	V-15	87	67
	Spring/2014	39	V-20	90	70

Social Policy Analysis for Social Workers was offered with Service Learning in Fall 2012 and Spring 2014. Service Learning was offered as a voluntary opportunity with maximum of ten hours for extra credit (2 extra points for each hour). 20 and 39 students registered for the class, respectively, with 15 and 20 students participating in the Service Learning, respectively. At least 87% of the participants reported positive experience with Service Learning, and at least 67% of the participants expressed return to do service after the class (See Table 2).

Student View on Service Learning

Engaging in Service Learning offers a great learning opportunity for students at The University of Akron. By engaging in Service Learning, a student can add that experience to their resume and use it in pursuance of a future career. By working in the community while in school, a student can build early relationships with services in the community. These relationships help in developing a personal set of resources in the community that may be utilized throughout their career. Service Learning also gives students the opportunity to discover what they like or do not like in their field. By developing this experience, they can learn to plan and develop for a future career after school. Service Learning creates new opportunities to advance and develop as a professional. Students will learn what to do and what not to do in the professional setting. The development of proper work skills will aid in the profession of their choice. Developing their own competence in proper practice will aid the development as a future professional. Service Learning will not only help students to develop professional work acumen but it will also help outside of work. Service Learning helps the development of other skills like time management. Service Learning also helps with

developing communication skills and fosters development in working with others. Social learning is crucial in helping to apply critical thinking and apply classroom knowledge to the practice setting. Service Learning is an essential tool in developing character and professional acumen for students at The University of Akron.

Community Views on Service Learning

Service Learning gives The University of Akron the great opportunity to develop and build relationships in the community. It can be crucial in helping to link and create new resources for students and for the community as a whole.

The university can work to create and form new partnerships in the community, thus creating new opportunities for everyone. The Akron community has variety of agencies and services to offer and with the university willing to create partnerships; it could create vast amounts of new opportunities for the community. By developing relationships with the agencies in the community, The University of Akron can work together to help and aid both the students and the community.

Students may not know of the many services offered; however, since the community is linked with the university, they are able to gain better access to information. Through partnerships, individuals can better access resources in the community.

The community and the university can work together to combat current issues in the community. Through this process the university can gain feedback from the community agencies and individuals regarding to the needs and opportunities in the community. This information can be used to help to reform or correct current issues in the community. Developing partnerships can assist the university in having a presence in the community. This partnership will help to garnish trust with people in the community, cultivate relationships and foster new services and opportunities.

By working with the community the university can help to determine what is working and what is not working to develop goals for the future. The University of Akron has been active in the community and has bridged the gap between services and resources. The community-university partnership can evaluate current decision making processes and help measure impacts of services. By gaining trust in the community, the university could potentially benefit in gaining new grants and funding. The community gains an institution to rely on when issues or problems arise. The community-university partnership is a crucial component in maintaining proper Service Learning practices.

Service Learning Helped Students' Retention and Success

In the Academic Year 2012-2013, 7,723 students were enrolled in Service Learning courses at The University of Akron (Table 1). This shows that Service Learning is of growing importance for the academic curriculum of the University of Akron. Service Learning can be crucial in maintaining retention and enhancing career development. Bringle, Hatcher and Muthiah [1] conducted a study to determine if service learning, in fact, had an impact on the retention of first year to second-year college students. The authors investigated whether Service Learning was related to intentions to stay on campus and re-enrollment the following fall on the same campus. They found that Service Learning courses were related to intentions to continue at the same campus and the relationship was strengthened with higher quality of Service Learning

courses. Their research showed that Service Learning classes helped to retain first year students to return for their second year.

Service Learning has gained recognition as a curricular strategy that yields multiple positive outcomes for students. Students in Service Learning courses have educationally meaningful community service experiences that enhance during their undergraduate education and beyond [1]. Service Learning can contribute to overall satisfaction with college. By using Service Learning, school increases retention rates and therefore, keep more economic gains from student enrollment. Service Learning engages the students, provides frequent feedback, fosters collaboration with the community, and promotes real life tasks. As shown in Table 3, among the six sites, two sites had employed five students after the initial Service Learning.

Table 3: Six Service Learning Sites

Service Learning Sites	Year started	Distance	Employment
The Haven of Rest	2010	.1 Miles	0
Akron Public Schools, Project RISE (Realizing Individual Strength through Education)	2010	.8	4
Freedom House for Women	2011	2.7	1
Doll Project	2011	2.5	0
Info Line, Inc.	2012	1.0	0
Children of Tomorrows Youth Organization	2013	3.5	0

Conclusion

Service Learning has been well practiced at The University of Akron. The professor of the four classes in human services (discussed above) used Ecological Model, established six sites with responsive site deputy offered opportunity of Service Learning for the students. As shown in the above cases, there are positive effects to the students, the university and the community. The triple effects also bring chain effects to benefit more populations in the community. The Service Learning teaching approach proved to be an effective for students’ success in the following perspectives:

- Service Learning promotes effective learning for students;
- By engaging in Service Learning, a student can add that experience to their resume and use it in pursuance of a future career;
- Students get to apply academic learning in professional setting and in turn help them pick a field of interest in which they can concentrate in school;
- Service Learning allows the student to see a professional setting so that they can understand what they must do to better prepare themselves for their future career; it also allows them to make mistakes so that they can adjust their approaches before they start their career.
- Service Learning can help build professional net-work and lead employment after graduation.

Reference

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