Service Learning: A Tool for Enhancing Teacher Preparation Programs

Verónica Galván Carlan
The University of Texas at Brownsville

Abstract:
Service learning is being implemented in an increasing number of higher education institutions because of the benefits it provides for students, faculty, universities, and communities. This article describes service learning and how it differs from other practices such as volunteer work, traditional field-based experiences, and student teaching. It also explains the components and benefits of service learning. Two case studies of teacher education students exemplify how service learning not only helps build students’ academic content knowledge, but also how it helps them to understand their own assumptions and biases. In both case studies, teacher education students created projects with Latino pupils, residing in a low socioeconomic area along the Mexico-Texas border. Thus, these service-learning experiences helped prepare the university students to adapt to the diverse needs of the learners in their future classrooms.

A strong movement aimed at reconnecting higher education with the community has gained momentum during the last two decades (Zotkowski, 1998). As a result, an increasing number of teacher education programs are incorporating service learning in their teacher training efforts (Root, 1997). In doing so, faculty members, students, and community partners work collaboratively to address critical issues confronted by members of the community and perhaps the nation (Weigert, 1998).

The focus of this article is to describe service learning and how it differs from other traditional educational practices. After a brief description of the definition of service learning, the various components of this pedagogical approach will be discussed. The benefits of utilizing well-planned, thoughtfully organized, and well-managed service learning activities are discussed. Included in this discussion are two case studies.

What is service learning?
For over two decades education researchers and practitioners have endeavored to define service learning. For the most part, the theoretical underpinning for service-learning’s approach to learning has been provided by traditional experiential learning theory such as John Dewey’s (Joyce & Weil, 1996). Thus, the service provided is viewed as experiential education. Various definitions, ranging from specific to broad, and various terms such as experiential education, curriculum-based learning, and community learning exist (Furco, 1996). Bringle and Hatcher (1996) define service learning as an educational, course-based service experience that is part of the academic curriculum and that attempts to meet community needs. Erickson and Anderson (1997) define service learning as a “pedagogical technique for combining authentic community service with integrated academic outcomes” (p. 1). Regardless of any differences, most researchers and practitioners agree that service learning differs from voluntary service, practica, field-based experiences, student-teaching experiences, and internships. The common thread in service-learning research suggests that service learning provides high-quality opportunities for students to acquire and enhance academic, social, civic, vocational, and personal skills, while improving their community.

Service Learning Components
The major components of service learning are service, learning, and reflection. In planning for the service and learning components, the challenge remains connecting the course objectives to relevant, authentic service-learning experiences that address the needs of the community. Planning service-learning activities that enhance course objectives and connect to relevant service-learning experiences are some of the critical elements that distinguish service learning from other practices such as field-based or student-teaching experiences. At first glance, the utilization of this pedagogical approach, which transforms classroom assignments and events to authentic, real-life experiences, parallels other practices such as field-based experiences. However, a distinguishing element is that, unlike other practices, the transformation of theory to practice is amplified by the inclusion of civic participation. Thus, what is learned in the classroom (i.e., theory) forms a link to what is experienced (i.e. practice). Concomitantly, this link of theory-to-practice serves as a building block to develop and enhance a sense of civic responsibility and social analysis (i.e. an ethos of service and caring). As a result, a reciprocal, communal relationship occurs—the students benefit, and the community benefits.

Many researchers consider the reflection component as the most crucial part of service learning.
It is the reflective component that links the first two components—service and learning. Reflection provides students with an opportunity to connect what occurs during the experience with their academic content knowledge and to examine what they learn about their personal biases and assumptions. Some of the methods that encourage students to assess what they learn from the service activities include in-depth and structured reflections, written journals, projects, information questionnaires (which assess students’ goals), and in-class presentations. According to research, effective reflection is a structured and planned component that includes self-analysis, is context driven (including setting) and occurs within a continuous time frame (before, during, and after experiences).

It is crucial that the assessment focus on the participants’ learning, not the type or quality of the service (Troppe, 1995). Unlike other practices (e.g., practica, student teaching experiences), service learning does not assess the skills within the context of the professional activities. Zlotkowski (1998) states that service learning shifts attention “away from an exclusive preoccupation with education as private gain and seeks to balance that concern with a focus on the common good” (p 107).

Benefits

Service learning researchers have conducted both quantitative and qualitative research regarding the benefits of this pedagogical approach. Eyler and colleagues (2000) provide an annotated bibliography of the various research studies that report the benefits of implementing service learning in higher education. Research supporting the use of service learning with future teachers reports that incorporating service-oriented activities help develop professional growth, as well as an “ethos of service and caring” (Erickson & Anderson, 1997, p. 10). Research conducted by Myers and Pickeral (1997) suggests that service learning has particular promise in preparing future teachers to motivate and educate K-12 students because it addresses teachers’ understanding of how children learn and develop, provides instruction based on knowledge of the community, and includes reflective strategies.

Case Studies

The case studies provide a narrative description of students' projects implemented in a public elementary school and in a government-assisted public housing learning center located in South Texas on the Texas-Mexico border. This southernmost region of Texas is categorized as one of the lowest socio-economic areas in the United States. For the most part, the families residing in the government-assisted public housing areas in this region include immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, and Cuba with extremely limited financial resources. Thus, as teacher education students engaged in actively interacting with the pupils who received the services, they were confronted with addressing the academic and social needs of learners with diverse social and linguistic backgrounds, such as Latino English-language learners (ELLs).

Incorporation of a service-learning component stemmed from the need to implement research-based methods and provide course-based service experiences that enhance the preparation of teacher education students (university-level students enrolled in a teacher preparation program or in a graduate program). Over the course of the semester, the teacher education students implemented unique service-learning projects. Various classroom discussions, readings, and assignments served as a foundation and provided the students with the research-based background needed to plan an activity, project, or lesson. The following case studies were selected from an array of students’ projects completed in two teacher education courses that had been redesigned to incorporate service-learning components. These case studies exemplify some of the unique student projects and events that occurred during these one-semester long courses.

In order to capture any changes regarding the participating students’ knowledge, biases, and assumptions, the students were required to participate in whole-class discussions and complete written journal reflections. The three-part journal included questions suggested by Zlotkowski (1998). As a result, students reflected “on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (p. 222). Written reflections were submitted within a 48-hour period after each service-learning experience and class discussions occurred upon returning to the classroom. If possible, whole-class discussions occurred immediately after all the participating pupils left the building.

Creating and maintaining a non-threatening and non-judgmental environment in which students felt comfortable to openly express their feelings, biases, and assumptions was a critical part of capturing in-depth, truthful reflections. Although class discussions allowed students to share various experiences, some students hesitated to verbally reveal their biases and assumptions in front of their peers. Students’ written reflective journals allowed them to engage in personally revealing the events that occurred during each experience, as well as their biases and assumptions. Thus, some students perceived written journal reflections as less threatening.
Case Study: If you had $100 dollars

The first case study describes events from an undergraduate education course that focused on creating and maintaining a safe, nurturing, and learner-centered environment. Thus, the primary goal of the service-learning experience was to provide students with opportunities to not only read about how to design physical environments, but experience the challenges of creating them. Thus, in order to successfully complete the service-learning component, teacher education students were required to design, plan, and implement a learning area or center.

Maria Elena, a teacher preparation student, prepared a learning area that integrated language arts and mathematics. Her plans included actively involving the pupils in reading, writing, and mathematical problem solving. She organized a learning area that provided the participating 5th grade pupils with opportunities to go on a shopping spree. As the pupils examined the products illustrated in the various store advertisements published by the local newspapers, they were asked to respond in writing to the following written prompt: “What would you buy if you had $100 to spend?” Maria Elena made it clear that the total amount of money spent on their shopping spree could not exceed the $100 allowance (excluding taxes). As the pupils selected items from several advertisements, they were asked to calculate and record, in writing, how much money they had spent. In addition, the pupils were asked to cut out and paste the selected items on a piece of paper, and below their selections clarify and justify their mathematical thinking in writing. She grew concerned that the students selected very few items and appeared to be reluctant to complete the assignment. Their written justifications and mathematical calculations clearly provided evidence that the pupils were well aware of the fact that the sum of items purchased totaled, on an average, to about $30. Maria Elena posed several open-ended questions in order to verify that the pupils understood that more than $50 balance remained in their budget. She asked the students to write about their shopping spree adventure. Much to Maria Elena’s surprise, the participating 5th graders wrote that $100 was “too much money to spend and that it was wrong to spend that much money on items that were not needed.” One of the participating 5th graders revealed a fascinating and insightful story. Every weekend he helped his parents, who had no formal schooling and did not speak English, sell items at a local flea market. He wrote, “Do you how many items we would have to sell at the flea market in order to take home $100 to spend?”

Examination of Maria Elena’s written reflection journal revealed that in addition to learning how to design an effective learning area, she learned not to make false assumptions about students’ mathematical knowledge. She wrote, “At first, I thought that the pupils could not calculate the amount of money spent and the remaining amount of money. Since I was teaching English-language learners living in a poor neighborhood, I assumed that they would love to have the opportunity to spend money. I was surprised to learn how much the pupils valued spending money only on essentials items for living. I learned that I need to keep the pupils’ backgrounds in mind.”

Case Study: Healthy Habits

The second case study reports events from a “Wellness and Literacy” project that emphasized healthy habits. In this case, graduate students were paired with an undergraduate student and served as their mentors. The primary goals of this undergraduate teacher preparation course were to understand the academic and social needs of pupils and learn to incorporate various models of teaching. In response to meeting the selected course objectives, the service-learning activities included utilizing cooperative learning as a model of teaching and learning with pupils. After pupils engaged in various activities, such as discussing relevant books regarding healthy habits, they collaborated with peers in order to create a book with text and illustrations that expressed their ideas regarding healthy habits.

The site selected was situated in a learning center located in a low socio-economic neighborhood in which the residents lived in government-assisted housing. This neighborhood is located less than one mile from the university that the students attend education courses. Graduating teacher education students often times apply, and are employed, to teach in the public schools located in this neighborhood.

In this project, students were allowed to select a topic that focused on healthy habits. In response to the growing national concern regarding children’s health, (e.g., diabetes, obesity, healthy eating habits, lack of physical exercise), students were asked to address these issues in their lessons. Alejandro, a participating teacher education student, planned a lesson with his team member that focused on keeping the body clean. After reading a book, the team asked the participating 4th grade pupils to discuss the importance of keeping the body clean. During the small-group discussion, one of the 4th grade pupils stated that bathing at least once a day, as discussed, was incorrect information. After asking this pupil for elaboration, Alejandro was shocked to find out that the pupil’s mother required all her children to bathe twice a day, once in the morning prior to leaving to school and once again in the evening. Alejandro’s reflections included the challenges of learning how to effectively implement cooperative
learning, as well as addressing any biases and assumptions. This is consistent with research that suggests service learning can help develop the professional growth and skills needed to implement various effective forms of instruction. The inclusion of a model of teaching is philosophically in line with educational reform initiatives such as enhancing student learning through the implementation of instructional strategies such as cooperative learning (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Myers & Pickeral, 1997).

Alejandro disclosed, both during class discussions and written reflections that his team had selected the topic because they assumed that the pupils were poor and “needed to learn about important things like taking a daily bath. I am ashamed that I had stereotyped poor children as dirty.” This revelation is consistent with research reporting an increased knowledge about other individuals, increased sensitivity to diversity, feeling greater concern and compassion for others.

Conclusion

Implementing a well-designed, thoughtfully organized, and well-managed course-based service learning experience is not a guarantee that teacher education students will be completely prepared for the challenges of the teaching profession. Nor, is it a substitute for quality class instruction. However, it is a valuable tool that enriches course content by providing students authentic opportunities to apply classroom knowledge. Concomitantly, participants foster a concern for social issues and develop a sense of civic responsibility. As a pedagogical approach, the give-and-take nature of the course-based service learning experiences is reciprocally beneficial for the community.

The evidence gathered from several course-based service learning experiences provide data that reveals that the participating teacher education students gained not only professional knowledge regarding the unique academic needs of learners with diverse social and linguistic backgrounds, but developed an awareness of social issues. Thus, the time and effort invested in designing, planning, implementing, and supervision course-based service learning components was time wisely invested. This translates into bringing together powerful tools for enhancing teacher preparation students’ potentials and abilities to adapt to the needs of learners with diverse backgrounds and question biased practices that inhibit meaningful learning opportunities for pupils.
References


