Enhancing Community Involvement and Social Justice in a Psychology of Women Course: Benefits of a Community Service Learning Approach

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A growing body of literature suggests that Community Service Learning enhances a number of educational and civic outcomes for college students (Balliet & Heffernan, 2000; Bringle & Duffy, 1998; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996). It is an approach that is well suited for enhancing students' sense of civic engagement, social responsibility, and social justice. Courses such as Community Psychology and Psychology of Women are ideal candidates for such an approach. The following paper will describe some of the benefits typically associated with Community Service Learning (CSL), how CSL was used in a Psychology of Women class, and the results of a brief survey of the CSL learners in the course.

Overview of Community Service Learning

Characteristics of effective community service learning include relevant and meaningful service with the community, the use of reflection to enhance academic learning, and purposeful civic engagement that emphasizes social responsibility and social justice (Howard, 1993). Through critical reflection, students are encouraged to integrate learning that occurs in the classroom with learning that occurs in community settings (Bringle & Duffy, 1998). This integration of theoretical knowledge with real-world applications enhances in-depth understanding of course concepts, retention of information, problem-solving skills, and academic initiative (Driscoll et al., 1996). Direct involvement in community settings also enables students to appreciate the complex nature of social problems and the complexity of effective interventions that attempt to address such problems (Elias & Gambone, 1998). Students' personal psychosocial development is also enhanced as they develop a sense of self-efficacy for effecting change in their communities, hone their interpersonal skills, identify their own strengths and skills, and develop an appreciation for diversity (Osborne, Weadick, & Penticuff, 1998). Finally, community service learning often enhances students' sense of civic responsibility, creating a long-term commitment to social responsibility and concern for social justice that often affects long-term career and/or community engagement goals (Fluharty & Kassaie, 1998). These outcomes are far more likely when the Community Service Learning course has been carefully constructed to achieve these goals.

Community Service Learning in a Psychology of Women Class

I have been using Community Service Learning in my Psychology of Women class for the past 8 semesters. This class takes a feminist approach to understanding the impact of race, class, and gender on women's lives. Course topics include stereotypes and discrimination, socialization, self-esteem and body image, sexuality and sexual preference, pregnancy and motherhood, relationships, work, poverty, health, and violence against women. The goal of this class is to help students critically reflect on their everyday experiences and the experiences of women around the world. Emphasis is placed on the impact of culture and the importance of social change.

It is this emphasis on culture and social change that led me to adopt a Community Service Learning approach. Students can be quite resistant to the idea that our culture operates to the benefit of some and to the detriment of others. In a Psychology of Women class, both male students and white, middle class students are hesitant to acknowledge their privileges. Lecturing to them does little to change this. Requiring them to work in the community where they can see the impact of culture, socialization, and opportunity first hand, however, can have wondrous results.

One component of a successful CSL class is placing students in appropriate community settings. Identifying sites should be guided by the goals of the class. In the Psychology of Women class described above, one of my goals was for students to observe gender socialization in action. This goal led to the decision to have my students work with young girls and teenagers. I also wanted students to observe cultural differences. This led me to further refine my criteria and select sites with diverse populations. Finally, I wanted students to be aware of social problems facing women and to become familiar with community-based approaches for addressing these social problems. This led to the selection of organizations dedicated to empowering women and girls from varying racial and class backgrounds. The final placement sites included after school programs and workshops at Girls, Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs, and the Housing Authority. Students also work with youth at a crisis shelter and a homeless shelter. Students engage in a number of different activities at these sites ranging from assisting the children with homework to conducting skill based workshops and support groups for girls.

The second key component of a successful CSL class is developing structured reflection tools that allow students to connect what they are learning at their site with what they are learning in class. Students need guidance in making these connections. Without well structured instructions for what to observe and how to make connections to course concepts, students are liable to have preexisting prejudices reinforced and to consider community involvement to be irrelevant. This would be worse than not getting them involved in the first place. Thus, it is important to develop a number of ways to help students connect what they are learning in class to what they are learning in the community.

One way to do this is to provide structured questions that students must answer after every class. In my Psychology of Women class, students must post their answers to 2 reflection questions on an electronic discussion board at the end of every class. They are allowed to choose from 5-10 questions that I distribute at the beginning of class. These questions are structured to prompt student thinking and help them make connections to course concepts. For example, here is a question on poverty:

> *"Half of all African American and Latina women-headed households live in poverty. Do any of the minority children you work with come from low-income, women-headed households? How are their family's experiences affected by gender and racial discrimination?"*

These questions are also structured to help students figure out how to actually apply course concepts at their site. For example, here is a question on socialization:

> *"How can you use the principles of social learning theory to guide your own interactions with the children you are working with? How can you challenge gender roles when working with these girls? Describe specific examples."*

These questions prompt student thinking on these topics. Class discussions are then used to reinforce this thinking by allowing students to share examples of theories they have observed in action at their site. I also use small group discussions to allow students working at the same site to compare their experiences and help one another detect examples of course concepts. These observations are then incorporated into a class presentation given by students working at each site at the end of the semester. These techniques greatly enhance the positive outcomes students experience as a result of Community Service Learning.

Benefits of Community Service Learning for Students

Students often comment on how helpful Community Service Learning was for them. They describe the class as a "pop-up book" where theories come to life before their eyes. They also describe gaining valuable information about possible career goals (in some cases deciding that they don't want to work with children after all!). To document positive changes more methodically, I started administering brief surveys about the kinds of changes students experienced as a result of CSL. These surveys ask students to rate their agreement with a series of statements about potential changes they may have experienced on a 1-7 Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (e.g., as a result of this class, my understanding of different cultures has increased). A total of 30 items describe changes in beliefs about feminism, stereotypes, diversity, social issues, volunteerism, activism, self-esteem, personal skills, and career goals.

To date, 108 students (out of 134 possible respondents) have completed these voluntary surveys. Results indicate that students believe they have changed on nearly every dimension. These changes were particularly pronounced in regard to feminism: 90.7% said their understanding of feminist psychology increased and 83.3% said their agreement with feminist principles increased. There were also dramatic changes in attitudes toward diversity: 85.2% said their understanding of different cultures increased and 88% said their appreciation of diversity increased. Concern about social issues was also high: 91.7% said their understanding of social issues increased and 91.7% said their concern about issues affecting women increased.

Students also indicated changes in their relationship to the community. For example, 86% said their sense of community connectedness increased and 85.9% said their awareness of community resources increased. Students also said that their sense of empowerment increased (82.5%). As a result, 82.4% said their intention to volunteer in the future increased.

Students also experienced a number of personal changes. For example, 85.1% said their appreciation of their own personal strengths and skills increased and 82.5% said their personal values and beliefs were clarified. Students also experienced an increase in their ability to take initiative (82.4%) and interpersonal skills (83.4%).

These results indicate a remarkable degree of perceived change resulting from participating in this Community Service Learning class. While the posttest only design makes conclusive statements impossible, these results do suggest that the students themselves believed

they had experienced a number of benefits from the CSL approach. The benefits of Community Service Learning do not end with the students, however.

Benefits of Community Service Learning for Community Partners

Community Service Learning can have numerous benefits for the organizations where students complete their service learning hours. This is particularly true when long-term partnerships are created. In regards to the Psychology of Women class described above, I have been able to send student service learners to these sites continuously for the last 3 years. This has been possible because I have been allowed to teach this class nearly every semester. When I have not taught the class, the Service Learning Coordinator at the Community Development Commission (one of my community partners) has taught the class as a part-timer and has used the same sites. This continuity allows the community organizations to count on having student volunteers on an on-going basis, allowing them to plan programs that they may not otherwise have been able to implement. For example, my students have implemented an array of programs that would not have otherwise occurred such as workshops on self-defense, healthy relationships, body image, and teen pregnancy prevention.   While supervising students at the site does require some effort on the part of organizations, they uniformly report that the benefits far outweigh the costs. In fact, the local housing project in Long Beach has come to rely on students from across our university to supplement dwindling staff and resources. Rather than implementing the programs themselves, remaining staff now supervise student volunteers who are able to work with a far greater number of the community residents. The benefits for community organizations are substantial.

Implications for Community Psychology Classes

Although the examples provided above were specific to a Psychology of Women class, there is considerable overlap between Community Psychology and the Psychology of Women. Both classes emphasize respect for diversity, analysis of oppression and privilege, and an emphasis on social change. As the results presented above indicate, these are the primary areas where students showed significant changes in their worldviews. These are also the primary areas that are liable to have the greatest benefits for community organizations. As a discipline that values community engagement, civic responsibility, and social change, Community Psychology should embrace Community Service Learning as a tool for both educating our students and effecting change in our communities.

Faculty who wish to incorporate Community Service Learning techniques now have a variety or resources to choose from. Many campuses are developing Community Service Learning Centers to assist faculty in the development of CSL classes, and some state university systems, such as California State University, have developed initiatives to implement CSL system-wide (Rozee & Randall, 2000). Numerous web based resources also exist to help faculty develop community service learning classes. Two good websites are APA's service learning webpage (http://www.apa.org/ed/slce/home.html) and the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (http://www.servicelearning.org/index.php). A growing body of literature is also being published on Community Service Learning. Good sources of articles are the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* (http://www.umich.edu/~mjcsl) and *Academic Exchange Quarterly* (http://rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/).

While converting a class to Community Service Learning does take some time, I think you will find that the benefits will far outweigh the costs. I have had nothing but positive experiences with Community Service Learning – and I think you will, too.

References

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