Using Service-Learning as Experiential-Learning: Strategies for Developing Successful Domestic and International Partnerships

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Abstract
Experiential education is an emerging pedagogical strategy. An extensive review of the literature on thinking and learning in educational settings shows that if the focus of educational experiences is having learners actively engaged in the teaching-learning process then experiential-learning is “learning through reflection about what one is doing”. Experiential learning can look quite different in a variety of undergraduate and graduate curricula, across varying majors and among different educational and community institutions. Service learning is one type of experiential learning that combines community service (e.g., teaching in underserved communities) with academic objectives and includes a self-reflection component. Before experiential learning is embedded into courses faculty must develop and sustain domestic and international partnerships. The four distinct steps needed to establish these partnerships are identification, development of trust, implementation, and maintenance. It is also important that all members of these partnerships share a mutual respect, common principles, similar interests and goals, and are in agreement with the delegation of roles and responsibilities to ensure the success of the project. In this presentation, the authors describe how the integration of these four stages of development led to the successful creation of long-term experiential-learning partnerships and highlight what they have learned and how these lessons might help faculty peers develop these competencies.

Keywords: community-campus partnerships. cultural interdependence, pedagogy

1. Introduction

Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis (AEE, 2018), and has been commonplace in vocationally or professionally oriented programs for many years. Service learning is a form of experiential learning that facilitates a deeper approach to learning and combines academic study with service in the community. As learners transform 'factual knowledge into usable knowledge' (Lumpkin, Achen, & Dodd, 2015; Bransford, et al., 1999) they utilize critical thinking skills, integrate knowledge over time and subjects, use theoretical application of knowledge to practical situations and higher order skills of analysis and synthesis.

The pioneers of service learning believed that a combination of service and experiential learning experiences would improve the quality of both and that it could lead to educational reform and democratic revitalization (Eyler, 2009). However, a major challenge for liberal
educators has been to develop learning experiences that will enable students to use what they learn in appropriate new contexts.

Faculty at Elmhurst College have been developing strategies that will provide learning experiences similar to the high impact learning practices identified by Kuh (2008). These practices take many different forms including; first-year experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning (e.g., short and long-term study abroad experiences), e-portfolios, service learning, community-based learning, internships and capstone courses and projects. Some -- such as study abroad -- are considered transformative and life changing.

The major goals of the faculty have been to create and develop long-lasting community-campus partnerships that can bring together diverse groups of people for implementing service learning as pedagogy to enhance these practices. By focusing on the four key steps of building community partnerships, i.e., identification, development of trust, implementation, and maintenance (A.E. Casey Foundation, 2005) and addressing the key principles that facilitate experiential learning the faculty were able develop long-lasting reciprocal experiential learning opportunities for students who participated in these service-learning activities.

Table 1. Principles for Strengthening Reciprocal Campus-Community Partnerships (CCPH, 1998).

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<td>1. Partners have agreed upon mission, values, goals in addition, measurable outcomes for the partnership.</td>
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<td>2. The relationship between partners is characterized by mutual trust, respect, genuineness and commitment.</td>
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<td>3. The partnership is built upon identified strengths and assets, but addresses areas that need improvement.</td>
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<td>4. The partnership balances power among the partners and enables resources to be shared.</td>
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<td>5. There is clear, open and accessible communication between partners.</td>
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<td>6. Roles, norms and practices for the partnership are established with the input and agreement of all partners.</td>
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<td>7. There are avenues for feedback to, and among all the stakeholders in the partnership.</td>
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<td>8. Partners share the credit for the accomplishments.</td>
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<td>9. Partnerships take time to show success.</td>
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Source: Community-Campus Partnerships for Health, 2001

2. Creating Collaborative Service-Learning Partnerships.

Creating collaborative partnerships can be challenging; it requires the time and commitment of each party to produce new patterns of interaction among different groups. The authors describe the steps and principles that underpin five service-learning partnerships that have provided productive, long-term service and experiential-learning ventures. While each partnership may have an expected goal or outcome, new and unanticipated goals and outcomes often emerge over time.
2.1. Step One: Identification of Partners:

Partnerships have agreed upon missions, values, goals, and measurable outcomes and agency leaders make a firm public commitment to these campus-community partnerships.

When identifying possible service-learning partners it is imperative that they have agreed upon mission, values, goals, measurable outcomes and accountability for the partnership. At Elmhurst College, we have identified the following international and domestic partners who share our mission, goals and values.

International Service-Learning Partners.

Jamaica: Elmhurst College collaborates with faculty and students from several schools and service agencies whose major goals are to provide quality education programs and after-school programs to underserved children in Montego Bay and Ocho Rios.

South Africa: The primary partners in South Africa are agencies dramatically affected by the apartheid movement, including pre-schools, elementary schools, social service agencies and children’s hospices in Cape Town.

United Kingdom: Elmhurst College currently has a partnership with schools in the Borough of Barking-Dagenham, a high-need area outside of London. There are four elementary schools and one secondary school in which our students observe, tutor one-on-one or with small groups of students.

Australia: The primary partnership in Australia is with multi-cultural public K-12 school in the southern suburbs of a large northern capital city. The partnership evolved over the past ten years.

Domestic Service –Learning Partners:

The Service-Learning program at Elmhurst College has partnerships with more than thirty local community agencies. These agencies include Exodus World Services (relocating refugees), Project C.A.R.E. Plus (providing tutoring services to elementary school children), Chicago Night Ministry, PADS, and the Salvation Army and other agencies that provide assistance and shelter to homeless and marginalized individuals in the greater Chicago.

2.2. Step Two: Developing Trust:

Relationships between partners must be characterized by mutual trust, respect, genuineness, and commitment. The emphasis is on building honest dialogue that can grow into trust for the work ahead, identifying strengths and addressing areas that need improvement.

In order to achieve an effective reciprocal partnership, and a successful service-learning project in any community, we found that a critical issue is for all partners to understand the conditions, values; socio-economic and cultural determinates of one another (Freyder, & O’Toole, 2000). A common failing of some college-community partnerships is that they often do not know who either the community or the campus are, or what each institution or organization does. To avoid this misstep, our history has been to “go to the mountain,” to
seek out the mission, values and goals of our partners and see how we can best fit in the context of each program.

Typical concerns expressed by community partners often relate to the purpose of the partnership and the commitment of the institution to the long-term success of these relationships. Chrislip and Larson (1994) describe “trust” as, “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward a common goal. The purpose of this trust is to create a shared vision and joint strategies to address concerns.” In short, getting to know you is getting to trust you. The Service -Learning Program at Elmhurst College is entering its 20th year of partnerships with many of our community agencies. The long-term commitment between our partners continues to provide Elmhurst College and community members with opportunities to demonstrate their expertise in significant ways that reinforce our commitment.

Effective service learning respects the dignity and self-worth of cultures and individuals within that community and searches for common ground among all those involved. Institutional service-learning programs need to be cognizant of false hierarchies or myths that have the potential to affect service-learning programs adversely (Mulling & Wiger, 1995). Sustainable partnerships are those in which there are no superior or deficient cultures, no superiority of knowledge-imagined expertise, and no hierarchy of wisdom. The successful service-learning program recognizes that an authentic partner is one who is sensitive to different cultural frameworks and understands that communities may have different definitions of power, leadership and success (Jacoby, 2003).

2.3. Step Three: Implementation

Input and agreement on norms, roles and practices for all partners allows for sharing of power and resources. Continued communication is critical for partnerships to be successful and the emphasis is on building honest dialogue that can grow into trust in preparation for the work ahead.

The implementation stage is where the “rubber hits the road” in service-learning partnerships. Recognizing that both partners have equal share of control and power in the operation of events is critical. Of equal importance, is opening and keeping open line of communication when implementing on site activities. Partners who can share power are more likely to be involved in meeting the challenges of the task and they can savor the journey of engagement and draw strength from its challenges (Loeb, 1999, Seifer, S. D., & Maurana, C. A. (2000).

Clear, open and accessible communication between partners is essential to establishing long-lasting community-campus partnerships. Kupiec (1993, pp. 114-118), urges partners to openly discuss their own interests, motivations, mission and goals. The partners should heed the timeless advice of the Mad Hatter who makes it abundantly clear to Alice that “Saying what you mean and meaning what you say” are entirely different. Further, if you are talking more than you are listening, you are not learning. It is critical that we spend time listening to what our partners say and what they actually mean.
2.4. Step Four: Maintenance

Partnerships are constantly evolving. Feedback is critical for the continued success of partnerships. Remember that partnerships often take time to show success and sharing the credit for accomplishments is key. Self-evaluation data must be provided regularly and collaboration should be highlighted at every opportunity.

As service-learning partnerships develop, it is important to establish and maintain relationships and to work in these partnerships. While it may take time to show success, it requires an on-going commitment from all parties. Both groups must know what works and what does not work and students must know the activities and be familiar with the individuals involved in the activities.

3. Conclusion: The Benefits of Building Service-Learning Partnerships

The principal beneficiaries of our collaboration with others to establish service-learning opportunities through experiential learning has been our students and the children and adults they serve. We have tried to illustrate how a set of core principles helped us in our task. Creating opportunities for divergent groups to make social changes provides them with a sense of purpose, pride, and service; teaches them new skills; shows them how to confront daunting obstacles and enables them to experience new worlds (Loeb, 1999). This spirit of shared hope motivates and sustains all of those who choose to part of the journey.

When students leave the comforts of their homes in America and embark on these new journeys, they have a sense of purpose and a passion for making change and they demonstrate their desire to make a difference. These experiences provide our students and community members with the energy and enthusiasm needed to teach just one more child how to read music; to travel to South Africa to teach in a container school, or spend time in an orphanage. This spirit of engagement can change anxiety and fear into a deeper understanding and compassion for children and adult victims of HIV/AIDS and can make a difference in their lives. Along the way, we have also learned something about our own journeys. Through these experiential learning partnerships, we had the privilege of playing a small part of the lives of our students and the lives of the diverse peoples of the world.

References


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