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ABSTRACT

A study compared the use of two approaches to service learning in an undergraduate human exceptionalities course. The "Unlimited Choice-group" of 13 students designed and implemented their own service learning project involving persons with disabilities, and the "Limited Choice-group" of 16 students chose between 3 prearranged projects. Quantitative data were obtained from the standard university course evaluation survey. Qualitative data came from student journals and interviews. Results suggest that students benefited from both approaches, but each approach had advantages and disadvantages. The course evaluation survey showed that students in the unlimited choice group responded more positively in the content and citizenship domains than the limited choice group. Class discussions about the service experience were a critical component of service learning--the unlimited choice group commented on their value, and the limited choice group wished there had been more discussion. Students in the limited choice group were able to make more specific connections between course concepts and the service experience, possibly because they served a more diverse population of children with disabilities. Most of the unlimited choice group focused on one individual, which greatly contributed to their satisfaction with the experience. Personal ownership, feelings of acceptance, development of relationships, and recognition of the value of the service all contributed to student satisfaction with the experience. Selection of appropriate service sites also contributed to the quality of the experience. (TD)

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SERVICE-LEARNING IN PRESERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION: A COMPARISON OF TWO APPROACHES

Service-learning has been defined as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996; p. 5). A primary goal of service-learning is to promote civic responsibility and social justice through authentic experiences which, in turn, lead students to become critical thinkers and activists. Well-structured service-learning experiences have the potential to help students develop a greater understanding of the social conditions that are faced by others. Boss (1994) maintains that not only does community service improve sensitivity to moral issues, but it also helps students overcome negative stereotypes that often act as barriers to interacting with others.

As professionals in the field of Special Education, we have a responsibility to educate the general public in order to create an informed citizenry that will support the needs, and basic civil rights of all individuals, particularly those with disabilities. This is especially critical today as we strive to create a more inclusive society. Jacoby (1996) supports this belief stating that institutions of higher education share a common goal "to teach individuals to live peacefully and productively in communities that value persons of different races, genders, physical and mental abilities, religions, class backgrounds, and sexual orientations" (p. 22). Service-learning, with its emphasis on reflection and reciprocity, is one means by which higher education can strive to accomplish that goal.

Over the past decade, service-learning as a pedagogical approach for increasing social responsibility in students has continued to gain acceptance in higher education. Based on a recent review of the literature, it appears that service-learning is fairly new to the field of special education at the higher education level. Therefore, little is known as to what constitutes "best practice" in this area. The purpose of this paper is to report the results of an investigation that compared the use of two approaches to service-learning in an undergraduate human exceptionalities course.

Method

Service-learning programs, by nature, are people-orientated in that much emphasis is placed on individualizing experiences for participants, therefore, no two individual experiences will be exactly the same. For this reason, Whitham (1990) advocates the use of a combination of techniques, preferably quantitative and qualitative, as a means of triangulating the data in order to provide the clearest picture possible of the program's effects. Whitham maintains that there are several benefits to using multiple measures in service-learning research. First, she states that we are often trying to "measure the unmeasurable." For example, how can we really be sure that the service experience resulted in greater motivation to attend class or to study harder? Through the use of multiple sources we can at least present a mass of data that may show evidence indicating trends toward a positive (or negative) direction. Second, since most service-learning programs are not standardized and we have little control over the experiences our student will have, things we did not plan or anticipate may occur. The use of multiple measures will increase our chances of discovering unexpected outcomes from the service experience. Third, the utilization of multiple measures will provide the most complete picture of the program and its effects.

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Research Design

This investigation was conducted during the Spring 1999 semester at a large Research I University located in the Intermountain West. Participants were recruited from two sections of an undergraduate Human Exceptionality course that has been officially sanctioned as a service-learning course. Each section of the course was designated as a treatment group.

To ensure that the quality of instruction was similar across the two conditions, the following counterbalancing steps were taken: (a) instructors from each section met regularly and guest lectured in each others' class, (b) the same textbook was used, (c) the same guest speakers were used, and (d) the same teaching assistant facilitated class discussions and provided written feedback on the students' reflective journals.

Unlimited-Choice Treatment Group. The first course section was designated as the "Unlimited-Choice" treatment group, in which the students were required to develop and implement a service-learning project on their own following general criteria provided by the instructors. Students were instructed to identify and contact an agency or individual with whom to engage in a service-learning experience and then to write up a proposal detailing (a) who would be involved, (b) what service to be provided, (c) where the service would take place, and (d) when the service would be provided. Instructor approval was required prior to implementation.

Limited-Choice Treatment Group. The second course section was designated as the "Limited-Choice" treatment group. Students in this section were given a choice between three prearranged service sites in which to fulfill their service-learning requirement. The three service-learning sites included: Camp ABC*, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing year-round recreational opportunities for individuals of all ages and disabilities; Neighborhood Preschool*, a non-profit organization that provides day care services for children from mainly low-income, single parent families; and Happy Valley School*, a public school facility for students with severe disabilities. Representatives from each agency made a brief presentation on the first night of class to describe the purpose of the agency, the populations served by the agency, and the nature of the service that students would be asked to perform.

Participants

Unlimited-Choice Group. In the Unlimited-Choice group (N = 13) 85% of the participants were female (11/13). The average age was 25.5, with a range between 20 to 40. The majority (77%) were juniors and seniors. All reported being employed, working an average of 29.1 hours per week. Only 17% reported being married, and 33% reported that they had taken a previous service-learning course. The following majors were identified: psychology, communications, sociology, family and consumer studies, early childhood development, occupational therapy, and speech and hearing.

Limited-Choice Group. Approximately 69% of the participants in the Limited-Choice group (N = 16) were female (11/16). The average age was 24.9, with a range between 18 to 42. The majority (75%) were juniors and seniors. Approximately two-thirds reported being employed, working an average of 31 hours per week, 42% reported being married, and 50% reported having taken a previous service-learning course. Reported majors were similar to those identified in the Unlimited-Choice group.

Participants from each group were asked to complete a pretest and posttest of the Scale of Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons [(SADP); Antonak, 1981]. The SADP is a measure of global attitudes toward people with disabilities as a group. The 24-item summated rating scale requires the respondent to rate each statement on a six-point scale (-3 to +3). Centile norms for the SADP reported by Antonak and Livneh (1988) indicate that a score of 123 is at the 50th centile for respondents in the 19-34 age group and at the undergraduate college level.

A total of 8 students in the Unlimited Choice Group completed the pretest, with a mean group score of 117. Thirteen students completed the posttest, with a mean group score of 119. A total of 15 students in the Limited-Choice Group completed the pretest, with a mean group score of 115. Sixteen students completed the posttest, with a mean group score of 117. Results from a Mann-Whitney U-test suggests that there is no significant difference between the two treatment groups.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from a variety of quantitative and qualitative sources. Quantitative data were obtained from the standard university service-learning course evaluation survey. Qualitative sources included students' reflective journals, focus group interviews, and telephone interviews.

In service-learning courses, the most widely used method for evaluating student growth is in the evaluation of student journals. In this study, students in both treatment groups were required to turn in their journals at three points during the semester. Students were not graded on their journals, but they were awarded points for completing the assignment. Journal transcripts were coded and indexed using FOLIO Views software.

A focus group is a purposive sampling of a specific target population using face-to-face, in-depth interviewing (Connaway, 1996). An interview protocol was developed by the investigator and the teaching assistant was trained to moderate. Participants were recruited from each section of the course. Focus groups were conducted following the final class session. The proceedings were recorded on audio tape, and transcripts were coded and indexed using the FOLIO Views program. Due to low participation in the focus groups (6 in the Unlimited-Choice group and 3 in the Limited-Choice group), follow-up telephone interviews were conducted during the summer by the teaching assistant. The same questions from the focus group protocol were asked.

Results

Service-learning Course Evaluation

Corbett and Kendall (1998) conducted Pearson product moment correlations to identify items on the survey that significantly correlate with two dimensions: Content and Citizenship. The evaluation was administered during the next to last class session. It was also administered university-wide to all students participating in officially designated service-learning courses. The results are reported in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Between Group Comparison: Response Percentage by Domain

Domain:	Group:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Content:	Unlimited Choice	41%	46%	13%		
	Limited Choice	25%	31%	23%	19%	2%
	Total University	19%	34%	29%	14%	4%
Citizenship	Unlimited Choice	46%	49%	5%		
	Limited Choice	31%	31%	31%	7%	
	Total University	30%	43%	18%	7%	2%

Note: Unlimited Choice (N= 13)
Limited Choice (N = 16)
Total University (N = 513)

Qualitative Analysis

The following common themes emerged from student journals submitted by both treatment groups: (a) personal feelings of the student, (b) impact of the exceptionality on the individual, (c) educational practices, (d) reaction of society to the exceptionality, (e) connecting course content to the service experience, and (f) other perceived values of the service experience.

Focus group and telephone interviews concentrated on the following areas: (a) value of the service-learning for understanding course concepts, (b) personal growth and benefit from the service experience, (c) benefit of the service to others, (d) influence on future plans, (e) degree to which the service-learning component met expectations, and (f) suggestions for improvement. A summary of the findings for each group follows.

Unlimited-Choice Group. In general, students in this group expressed less apprehension about initiating the service, probably because they had made prior contact while developing their service proposal. However, a few did indicate some negative reactions (surprise, shock, frustration) following their initial experiences. Concerning the impact of the exceptionality, students frequently commented on how “normal” the individual was despite the disability. Others observed how the disability affects the individual’s self-esteem and how it often limits major life activities. Observations about the educational system were also mixed. On one hand, students observed how some teachers were able to individualize instruction, work towards goals, and promote inclusion. Conversely, others experienced cognitive dissonance between what they learned in class about “best practice” and what they actually observed in the field. Students remarked about boring instruction, students being ignored for long periods of time, the stigma of being pulled out of class, humiliating student discipline procedures, and the lack of understanding between special educators, general educators, and parents.

Concerning society’s treatment of exceptional individuals, most of the observations were negative, including comments on the stigma placed on these individuals and the lack of public accommodations. Most of the students commented on how the service experience helped them to better understand the concepts that were covered in the class. However, few provided specific examples of how it did.

Many students in the Unlimited Choice group indicated that a major benefit of the service experience was the effect it had on their personal growth and understanding. Typical comments included, “I am a lot more understanding than I was before,” and “I think I am a better person, knowing what I know now.” For the majority in this group, however, the service experience did not have a major impact on their future professional plans other than to reinforce plans already made. All of the students responded positively on how well the service component met their expectations. Frequent mention was made concerning the value of class discussions and the flexibility of being able to design their own project.

Limited-Choice Group. More students in this group expressed apprehension prior to making initial contact at their chosen service site. Common concerns included insecurity about being accepted by the children, fears about being a bother to the staff, fears about doing something wrong, and uncertainty about their own reaction to the children’s disabilities. After the first few contacts, however, most of these concerns were alleviated. The students in this group seemed to make more frequent and insightful reflections concerning their reactions and feelings toward their experiences.

Observations about the impact of the exceptionality were very similar to those of the Unlimited-Choice Group, as were observations about the educational system. One student, in particular, remarked that what he observed “was closer to babysitting than education.” That seemed to be the minority opinion, however, as most students commented on the positive things they observed. The students in this group, again, seemed to make more frequent and insightful observations about the educational system. This could be because more of them did their service in a school setting. Observations about society’s reaction to the exceptionality mirrored those of the Unlimited-Choice group.

Overall, students in the Limited-Choice group demonstrated the ability to link specific concepts covered in class to their service experience. However, students who did their service at Neighborhood Preschool expressed greater difficulty in making these links. This is probably due to the fact that few children with disabilities are served at this agency, whereas Happy Valley School and Camp ABC serve children with disabilities exclusively.

Similar to the Unlimited-Choice group, this group indicated that the service experience reinforced previous career decisions, but did not influence them to make any major changes. Several students commented on how the service provided them with experiences that would contribute to their professional development. Most of the students reported that the service-learning component was a valuable experience, and they were glad they had done it.

Discussion

Analysis of the data suggests that students benefited from both service-learning approaches. However, each approach seems to offer unique advantages and disadvantages. The following discussion will examine these.

Results from the Service-Learning Course Evaluation (see Table 1) clearly show that students in the Unlimited-Choice group responded much more positively in both domains. In the Content domain, 87% of the Unlimited-Choice group responded positively compared to 56% of the Limited-Choice group and 52% of the Total University. In the Citizenship domain, 95% of the Unlimited-Choice group responded positively compared to 62% of the Limited-Choice group and 73% of the Total University.

What can explain this difference? It is impossible to know for sure. However, there are some indications to be found in the data. First, students in the Unlimited-Choice group liked the flexibility and freedom of being allowed to develop their own service projects. They identified areas of personal interest and engaged in service that had meaning to them. Conversely, students in the Limited-Choice group could only choose from three options. Although these options provided a great deal of variety in types of clients served, time availability, and geographic location, several students expressed frustration in finding a way to fit the service requirement into their busy schedules. Moreover, the limitation of options may have lessened the students' feeling of ownership of the service project.

Second, several students in the Unlimited-Choice group commented on the value of in-class discussions about the service experience, while several in the Limited-Choice group wished there had been more opportunity to do this. Part of this can be explained in how the two classes were scheduled. Students in the Unlimited-Choice group met two afternoons each week, while the Limited-Group only met Monday nights. Although both classes met for the same amount of class time, it may be that the twice-per-week schedule was more conducive to class discussions. However, it could also be that the instructors for the Unlimited-Choice group placed more emphasis on class discussion. Regardless, it appears that class discussions are a critical component of service-learning.

One advantage that the Limited-Choice approach seemed to offer is that students in this group were able to make more specific connections between course concepts and the service experience in their reflective journals. One possible explanation is that the agencies that were selected for the Limited-Choice group serve a diverse population of children with exceptionalities. Conversely, most of the students in the Unlimited-Choice group focused their service on one individual. However, it appears that the ability to develop and sustain a relationship with a single individual or group of individuals greatly contributes to the students' satisfaction with the overall service experience.

The results of this investigation suggest that service-learning can be a valuable component in this type of course. Personal ownership, feelings of acceptance, development of relationships, opportunities for class

discussions, and recognition of the value of the service all contribute to student satisfaction with the experience. Selection of appropriate service sites also contributes to the quality of the experience.

*Note: The names of the service-site agencies have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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