

# **Integrating Service-Learning in Teacher Education to Raise Disability Awareness**

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## **Abstract**

This article examines how service-learning was integrated effectively into two teacher education courses at a Mercy university in New Jersey to raise awareness regarding the needs of diverse learners, particularly those with disabilities. Specific goals of the service-learning requirement, description of the service-learning activities, and student reflections and attitudes towards their experience are reported. Future recommendations for integrating service-learning in teacher education are discussed.

## **Integrating Service-Learning in Teacher Education to Raise Disability Awareness**

Students across America are participating in service-learning activities as part of their educational experience and students in higher education are no exception. The use of some form of service-learning paradigm has increased dramatically in the past two decades. Recent research (Learn and Serve America, 2006) shows that at least one quarter of all higher education institutions, and more than half of all community colleges, have adopted some type of service-learning program. These service programs span a wide range of disciplines and teacher education is among the most prominent.

The use of service-learning as a viable instructional pedagogy is supported by research (Eyer, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001; Furco & Billig, 2002) pointing to gains in students' personal and social development, civic responsibility, and academic learning. Anderson (1998) further identifies the following rationale for integrating service-learning specifically in teacher education: (a) to prepare pre-service teachers to use service-learning as a teaching method with their students; (b) to sensitize teachers to the professional ethical obligation of teaching with "care," fostering life-long civic engagement, adapting to the needs of diverse learners, and demonstrating a commitment to advocate for social justice for children and families; (c) to enhance teachers' ability to reflect critically on their teaching and current educational practices; (d) to develop in pre-service teachers the dispositions needed to adopt other educational reforms; (e) to facilitate the learning of how to perform a variety of roles needed to meet the diverse needs of students such as counselor, community liaison, and advocate; and (f) to cultivate service-oriented teachers who can collaborate effectively in schools with integrated community partners.

Research investigating service-learning in teacher education is still in its early stages. The variety of terms used to describe service-learning, including volunteerism, service, community service, and experiential learning, has contributed to difficulty analyzing its effectiveness. While many definitions of service-learning exist (Eyer & Giles, 1999), all have two core concepts in common. First, service-learning is an instructional strategy that integrates service and learning. Unlike service or volunteerism, service-learning distinguishes itself by requiring reflection of the

service for the purpose of learning. This learning is linked with academic content and standards. Reflection may take the form of oral discussions, silent thinking, or written journals and papers. Second, the service provided addresses a real community need in a meaningful way. Service-learning is a specific type of experiential learning that provides reciprocal benefits to both the provider and the recipient. The student benefits from the deeper learning that occurs from the authentic experience while the community benefits from the needed service provided.

In addition to discrepancies in terminology, considerable variance exists in approaches (Furco & Billig, 2002) to integrating service-learning in higher education. Strategies range from short term experiences designed to introduce teacher candidates to the variety of community service opportunities available to intensive experiences which immerse students in an unfamiliar culture for an extended period of time. Regardless of the approach utilized, positive benefits may be gained if learning goals and objectives are specified clearly.

This article examines how service-learning was integrated effectively into two teacher education courses at a Mercy university in New Jersey. Specific goals of the service-learning requirement, description of the service-learning activities, and student reflections and attitudes towards their experience are reported. Future recommendations for integrating service-learning in teacher education are discussed.

## Method

The writer introduced service-learning into the teacher education curriculum at a Roman Catholic university located in the suburbs of central New Jersey. As an institution founded and sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, the university is committed to the core values of respect, integrity, justice, compassion, and service. Service-learning appeared to be a promising method to achieve the university's mission of developing actively engaged citizens with the education and will to translate concern for social justice into action. Mindful that service-learning programs must operate as integral parts of the institution and be consistent with the mission and goals of the institution (CAS, 2005), the Office of Service-learning was established during the same academic year this research was conducted to facilitate and support the integration of service-learning into the culture of the university.

All teacher education programs at the university include an integrated curriculum resulting in eligibility to teach both general and special education. The program is based on an inclusive perspective that all students have a right to a quality education, that all students are capable of learning, and that all students learn best in classrooms reflective of the social, ethnic, racial, religious, and ability levels represented in society. Consequently, all candidates must exit the program prepared to teach students with diverse and special needs.

While the teacher education program includes experiential learning through practicum field experiences, the integration of service-learning into two key courses was designed to provide valuable opportunity to focus specifically on the diverse needs of exceptional students the candidates would be qualified to serve. A total of 50 undergraduate students participated in service activities required in these two courses instructed by the writer during the Spring semester. The primary purpose of the experience was to raise awareness and increase sensitivity to the needs of diverse learners so that these future inclusive educators would serve students with special needs with the core values of the university. A secondary goal was to increase students'

sense of civic, moral, and professional obligation to lead, serve, and advocate for others by raising awareness of the community organizations and opportunities that exist.

Students were instructed to select from a “menu” of approved service activities provided by the writer (see Table 1). Activities conducted by the Student Chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) at the university comprised the majority of suggestions on the menu.

**Table 1**

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**Menu of Service Activities**

Activity	Description
Direct service	
Arc Dance	CEC Student Chapter hosted dance for members of the Arc. Service involves providing and serving refreshments and socializing with guests.
Arc Bowling	Recreational activity sponsored by the Arc. Service involves assisting and socializing with members of the Arc’s Ocean Rollers bowling league.
Arc Art Club	Recreational activity sponsored by the Arc. Service involves assisting and socializing with members of the Arc while creating an arts and crafts project.
Arc Cooking	Daily living skills activity sponsored by the Arc. Service involves assisting and socializing with members of the Arc while cooking a meal.
Arc Saturday Program	Recreational program sponsored by the Arc including board games and field trips to malls, food shops, and movie theatres. Service involves assisting and socializing with members who participate in the program.
Tournament of Champions Dance	CEC Student Chapter assisted Senior Class in hosting this <i>Evening of Stars</i> dance for adolescents who participated in the local Tournament of Champions.
Indirect service	
Providence House Book Drive	CEC Student Chapter sponsored book drive for children of abused and battered women.
Honduras Fund Raiser	CEC Student Chapter participated in this university event to raise funds for a service trip to Honduras.
Six Flags Great Adventure Science Day	CEC Student Chapter participated in this event by sharing modified science lesson plans to accommodate diverse learners.
Advocacy	
Annual NJCEC Conference	CEC Student Chapter attended and presented at this annual conference.

The primary mission of the Student CEC Chapter at the university is to better serve individuals with exceptionalities by applying knowledge and expertise in the area of special education, providing voluntary services, and promoting educational programs that inform individuals about disabilities. The Student CEC Chapter also cultivates future leaders in the education of youth with disabilities and encourages individuals to advocate for persons with disabilities and become part of the special education profession. Since the Chapter had been active for three decades, a rich resource of service activities from which to choose was available, particularly with the local Arc organization. Activities fell into three broad categories: (a) direct service where students engage in face to face interaction with the individuals being served; (b) indirect service where students address a community need but were physically apart from the individuals benefiting from the service; and (c) advocacy where students increase public awareness of a problem, need, or injustice. Students were also permitted to participate in service activities not included on the list, with prior instructor approval. The challenge was to formalize the learning gained from the service performed.

In an effort to facilitate learning and make the service more meaningful, students were instructed to prepare for their selected service activity by reading related literature about the organization sponsoring the event and the population being served, interviewing knowledgeable persons (e.g. family members of individuals with disabilities, employees of the Arc), and/or attending chapter, community, and state meetings addressing related needs. Students were required to document their preparation, service, and reflection on timesheets. Performance was assessed using the timesheets and written reflection papers integrating knowledge gleaned from the experience.

## Results

Qualitative analysis of written reflection papers indicates positive effects of service on student learning (see Table 2). All students reported decreased apprehension and increased feelings of compassion, understanding, and competency toward meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Additionally, one third of the students expressed a heightened sense of civic responsibility and desire to participate in community service in the future as a result of their service experience. Other written reflections referred to faith-based personal growth, willingness to use service-learning as an instructional pedagogy in their own k-12 classrooms, and reciprocity in learning from the experience.

Student attitude towards service-learning was also positive. Results of a 10 item survey administered to 50 students participating in the study reveals 90% agreed or strongly agreed that service-learning should be a part of the teacher education program. Additionally, approximately 90% rated the service-learning activity helpful or very helpful in terms of their personal and professional growth. While no time requirement was specified, survey results indicate the majority of students spent 30 minutes to 1 hour preparing, 2 to 3 hours performing the actual service, and 30 minutes to 1 hour reflecting for a total of 3 to 5 hours. Perhaps most encouraging is three quarters (76%) of the students responded they would be likely or very likely to seek additional service-learning opportunities in the future as a result of their experience.

## Table 2

### Analysis of Written Reflections

#### **Increased Disability Awareness**

“It was a wonderful experience..... It allowed me to gain a better understanding of people with special needs.”

“To be honest, up until this point in my life, I have been slightly intimidated and frightened by the differences of those children with mental impairments and handicaps.....I walked out of this experience happy to have taken part in such a fun and rewarding activity. I feel that I am much more understanding and willing to help all unique students.”

“I have a better understanding of the needs of those with mental retardation and developmental disabilities..... I gained sensitivity and compassion while conversing with them....As a future inclusive teacher, I will respect and have compassion for all students.”

“I will now be more conscious about students who have special needs and try my best to accommodate them.”

“This was an eye opening experience and I realized these people were just like us.....They have feelings, emotions, and needs just like everyone else.”

“Just because an individual is deficient in some area such as cognitive or physical ability, they still have something to offer. Everyone is able to contribute to a group in his or her own way.”

“In my classroom I want all my students, no matter who they are, what they look like, or what they can and can't do, to feel accepted and acknowledged. I don't want them ever to feel left out or not accepted by me or their peers. Their abilities will not change this either because I learned that they each will have many unique talents.”

“I learned that a good teacher can teach most children, a great teacher can teach ALL children.”

“This was a moment to take in..... I guess what I am saying is that it felt as if I made a difference.”

#### **Civic/Community Responsibility**

“Teachers must be involved with their students and the community.”

“I hope I can find the time to volunteer at another function where I can contribute my time so others can benefit.”

“In the years to come, I plan to be very involved in this program and organization.

“Being a part of this event made me realize that I would want to volunteer at more events like this.”

“I am now interested in joining CEC and think that teachers should be involved in their professional organizations

#### **Faith-based Personal Statements**

“God created them just as He created me and each of us has gifts, talents, and worth.... I understand the wealth of helping oneself while helping others.”

“The Arc has core values.....one in particular stood out, *People First*. We are all people no matter what shape, size, color, or disability we have..... I connected with this value and it made me realize we are all important.”

#### **Use of Service-learning in Classroom**

“I learned about the importance of getting students more involved in what they are learning in the classroom.”

“As a future teacher, I will incorporate hands-on experiences into my lessons in order to keep students interested and motivated.”

#### **Reciprocal Learning**

“When I am an inclusion teacher, I will always keep in mind that students with special needs can teach me and other students.”

## Discussion

Results of this study support the use of service-learning as an effective instructional pedagogy in teacher education. While the scope of the service performed was limited, substantial gains were observed. Participation in service activities appeared to raise students' awareness and sensitivity toward the diverse needs of the disabled and contribute to the development of professional dispositions such as caring, acceptance of diversity, and high expectations necessary for inclusion. Additionally, participation in service-learning activities introduced students to their role in collaborating with community partners and the variety of opportunities available for lifelong civic engagement. These initial findings are encouraging as service-learning is integrated into additional programs at the university. Future plans to further integrate service-learning into the teacher education program include extending the service time required, increasing the number of community partners, and broadening the range of service activities suggested.

More than a decade has passed since Boyer (1990) challenged leaders of higher education to broaden their view of scholarship to encompass application, where knowledge is applied to address real problems and world needs. Boyer (1994, 1996) envisioned a new American college engaged with the community and committed to improving the human condition in a very intentional way.

Boyer's scholarship of engagement invites university leaders to re-examine the mission of higher education to include educating students to be lifelong, responsible citizens. Service-learning appears to be a promising method to meet this challenge.

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