

Building Community One Structure at a Time: A Partnership Between Social Work and Landscape Architecture Students

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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning is invaluable when promoting interdisciplinary approaches to teaching complex issues. This article reports on a five-week collaboration between undergraduate students in social work and landscape architecture courses, project impetus being a common-reading text. Students (n=54) constructed three-dimensional models of children's playgrounds and prepared academic posters describing restorative interventions based on their service-learning experiences with community partners. Projects were displayed at university-sponsored workshops. Participation in common reading programs has promising implications for interdisciplinary collaboration. .

Keywords: community engagement, experiential learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, group work

INTRODUCTION

The value of interdisciplinary collaboration within higher education is evident across a spectrum of disciplines; these include, but are not limited to, nutrition education (Shor, 2010), journalism (Stone, English, Ekman, & Fujimori, 2008), social work (Bronstein, 2003) and speech and language pathology (Edwards, Newell, Rich, & Hitchcock, 2015). While the foundation of service-oriented disciplines focuses on individual client needs, oftentimes co-occurring challenges are present. Networking and interdisciplinary collaboration help mitigate these challenges. Thus, it becomes increasingly salient in higher education to help young professionals-in-training gain experiences that promote collaboration

across a range of disciplines. In fact, Jacobs and Walsh-Dilley (2018) espouse that interdisciplinary approaches foster the development of critical thinking and promote an understanding of societal complexities. The goal of this project was to highlight the value of interdisciplinary collaboration steeped in service learning. Specifically, the authors demonstrate how undergraduate students from two distinct service disciplines (landscape architecture and social work) used a common reading book as a foundation for an experiential learning project.

Each year, the university's common reading program (CRP) endorses a book for all undergraduate students to read. Stretching across various disciplines, common reading books are designed to enrich student experiences and nurture development, as these shared texts play a central role in

bridging the divides on college campuses (Soria, 2015). The CRP can serve as a catalyst for educators who want to incorporate interdisciplinary learning opportunities and community service projects based on thematic topics within the CRP book. The primary authors of this article chose to participate in the 2016 CRP to enhance their existing course curriculums in social work and landscape architecture, through a team-based learning project. Through this innovative partnership, students began to realize the value of collaboration and interprofessional learning to assist a variety of social service client groups. Students read *Three Little Words: A Memoir* written by Ashley Rhodes-Courter about her childhood in the foster care system, from ages 3 to 12. The story highlights many of the challenges social work professionals address in the practice setting. Rhodes-Courter described events surrounding her experience with inept social workers, overburdened courts, and neglectful foster parents (Rhodes-Courter, 2008). For this project, the book provided the foundation for generating ideas on how to modify the physical environment within community agencies that were providing service-learning opportunities to social work students. Little has been written about collaborative community work between social work and landscape architecture professionals. More has been written about urban planning and social work. Costello and Raxworthy (2016) describe how professional social workers, urban planners, and landscape architects joined forces to address “wicked issues of rapid urban growth, poverty, food insecurity, and biodiversity loss” (p. 259). The authors felt it was important to introduce students to similar complex issues within their rural communities. The goal of this project was to help students identify relevant information to enhance practice skills while serving the social service agencies in local rural communities.

This article examines the learning experiences of students working on a team-based project designed to foster their under-

standing of client services in nonprofit agencies (Taylor & McLendon, 2013). Students were encouraged to use reflection and critical design thinking to construct a scaled three-dimensional model to demonstrate how modified physical spaces can enhance services for their chosen community partner/agency. Combining landscape design elements with macro social work practice, the project formed a unique partnership between students enrolled in an entry-level landscape architecture course with students enrolled in an upper-level social work practice course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will discuss how service learning and experiential learning were combined to provide students with a real-world application. The proliferation of service learning across the university is indicative of the university’s commitment to work with the community to make changes to improve the quality of life for all citizens within the state. Service is a major component of the university’s mission and purpose, and students have an integral role in this work. In fact, the co-curricular programs and services offered by the university are designed to enhance the overall learning experience of students at every level in their academic career. Situated in a rural community, the opportunities afforded to students allow them to gain exposure to real-world issues. Moreover, students are encouraged to systematically address societal challenges and issues by exercising critical thinking and working collaboratively via intra- and interdisciplinary avenues. Thus, it becomes increasingly salient to integrate diverse learning theories to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Experiential learning embraces the notion that students move through dimensions of learning in order to have a more robust educational experience. The process of learning is a holistic endeavor generated from thinking, experiencing, reflecting, and acting (Kolb, 1984). Further refinement by

Kolb and Kolb (2005) explains that this approach to learning involves creative tensions between dialectically related modes, with concrete experience and abstract conceptualization along with reflective observation and active experimentation. These modes function as foundations for learning. Simply stated, the cycle of learning is dependent on situational opportunities that allow learners to expand their knowledge while engaging in the different modes of processing new information. Experiential learning offers a platform to help learners bridge the gap between theory and practice, as it encourages students to “transform inert knowledge into knowledge-in-use” (Eyler, 2009, p. 24), which is valuable when fostering collaboration.

Participating Disciplines

Social work education standards require that students demonstrate competency informed by “knowledge, values, skills and cognitive and affective processes that include critical thinking, affective reactions and exercise of judgement in regard to unique practice situations” (Council on Social Work Education, 2015, p. 6). When practiced in the context of service learning, students are more apt to draw parallels between theoretical concepts and practical knowledge gained in the extended classroom: the community agency.

In landscape architecture, experiential and team-based learning frequently take place in the design studio. In social work, experiential learning is often incorporated into the curriculum through service-learning and field practicum requirements. During this project, students gained knowledge and understanding through learning-by-doing in the design studio and through service learning at local nonprofit social service agencies (Schön, 1995). Working in interdisciplinary teams, students were tasked with using critical thinking to generate ideas for restorative interventions. Group work for this project was structured on team-based learning (TBL) principles. The premise behind TBL is that it enhances students’ en-

agement by offering them the opportunity for learning at a higher level using critical thinking and communication skills (Macke, Taylor, Taylor, Trapp, & Canfield, 2015). Michaelsen and Sweet (2008) reported positive impact on students’ learning when students 1) work on a problem that is significant to them, 2) address the same question, 3) use course concepts to make a choice, and 4) report findings simultaneously. They also reported potential for building strong relationships between instructors and students due to an “absence of student apathy” (p. 25).

Significance of this Project

Research on children in foster care systems across the country highlights the exacerbating circumstances that plague the system. These include burdensome case-loads, burnout, and changing organizational climates (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). These issues directly impact the level of service offered by the service professionals and the experiences of their clients (Shim, 2010). Social and behavioral modification techniques emphasize the importance of identifying ways for “children and adults to calm themselves when angry, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, and make ethical and safe choices” (St. John, 2014); in the design disciplines, discussions focus on physical modifications to outdoor environments that have positive impact on human behavior. From an historical perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979) advanced the notion that the quality and context of the environment includes functionality within and between a child and his/her environment. Both social work and landscape architecture examine the benefits of restorative practices, and their effects on human behavior modification, health, and the safety of natural and built environments. The goal of both disciplines is to improve relationships between the built environment and humans, striking a balance to improve the overall client experience within the social service agency. Students were able to enter this complex discussion given the va-

riety of readings provided to them by their professors.

METHODOLOGY

In this section, the authors discuss how students worked on a significant problem to address the same question using course concepts from both disciplines and reported their findings at a joint presentation. The authors explain the project description, learning objectives, project time line, and evaluation instruments.

Project Description

The purpose of this project was to use the CRP book to motivate students to work beyond expectations of the existing curriculum by thinking creatively, working collaboratively, and taking a leadership role in proposing ideas ‘not yet thought of’ (Braungart & McDonough, 2002). Students spent five weeks exploring the value of restorative play areas for nonprofit youth development centers, foster care facilities, after-school programs, and nonprofit agencies. They examined their agency while considering themes discussed in the CRP book.

Social work students were required to participate in 12 hours of service learning at a local nonprofit agency. Service learning is a component of the existing course curriculum, and it is designed to help prepare students to enter the job market as social workers. While job shadowing, students became familiar with their assigned facility. Students identified their client base and provided a description of the agency including photos of the site. They examined their agency while considering themes discussed in the CRP book. Students observed that there were limited opportunities for children to play outdoors. This was the link that allowed the social work students to experience the role of a client, and the landscape architecture students to experience the role of a designer. At this point in the project, students formed nine working groups based on interest in a specific community agency.

Each group had one or more upper division students enrolled in Social Work with Communities and Organizations (n=24) and one or more freshmen enrolled in Introduction to Landscape Architecture (n=30). Students used library resources and professional journal articles to build their knowledge and understanding about restorative environments and nonprofit organization management. To better document their findings, a university librarian gave lectures on how to select appropriate resources and assemble a robust academic poster. The upper division social work students conducted their own research, one example being an article on restorative practices in schools (McClusky, et al., 2008; St. John, 2014).

Students gathered ideas from the readings that they determined to be appropriate for enhancing the environment around their group’s chosen social service agency. When proposing restorative interventions, students addressed safety, accessibility, and sustainability issues. They included biophilic design principles including form, line, color, texture, pattern, light, fresh air, and water (Browning, Ryan, & Clancy, 2014). With the help of the social work students, landscape architecture students generated innovative playground designs for each of the community partners where social work students completed their course requirement for service learning. Scaled three-dimensional models were constructed showing new play equipment, soft-fall paving materials, security fencing, and edible plant materials.

Learning Objectives

Five learning objectives were established to help guide the learning experience for this project:

1. Social work students will assess the existing physical environment of the community agency.
2. Social work students will make recommendations for the provision of new restorative environments.
3. Landscape architecture students will design and build a three-

dimensional model representing a restorative environment to fit the site at the community agency.

4. Working together, social work and landscape architecture students will generate a report based on research, precedent images, and on-site observations.

5. All students will present academic posters and three-dimensional models to a public audience at a university-sponsored teaching and learning event.

Timeline and Assignments

Students attended their regularly scheduled classes on Monday and Wednesday and met together on Fridays in the landscape architecture design studio. Prior to week #1, all students were required to read the CRP book.

Week #1: Professors shared discipline-specific knowledge with each other's students. Social work students were required to take photos of various spaces around their social service agency, which included building façades, exterior spaces, and parking lots. In many agencies, students were allowed to take photos of inside rooms where children spend time, noting the characteristics and the purpose of the interior spaces. Additionally, social work students were required to create a narrative that described their agency. This included the agency name, location, and number of clients served. While social work students were engaged in these activities in the agencies, landscape architecture students were required to examine literature and other assigned material provided by the resource librarian to better understand the needs of the children using the social service facilities.

Week #2: During this phase of the project, landscape architecture students prepared a presentation describing three award-winning restorative playground projects, plus one biophilic design principle from assigned readings. They were tasked with reflecting on and describing how projects

examined in the literature related to agency sites. In collaboration with social work students, landscape architecture students prepared and submitted a plan of action for completing their group design to address deficiencies in the actual facilities.

Week #3: Social work students engaged in a learning activity with the university librarian on ways to create academic posters. A university library specialist attended a class session to educate students on the major components and criteria of academic posters. During this phase, both groups of students engaged in a guided reflection exercise where they were encouraged to imagine the thoughts and experiences of a child and write down their thoughts and ideas. Upon completion, they were asked to discuss the feeling(s) they hoped to evoke in clients. They were then asked to describe the physical changes they hoped to achieve to mitigate stress and promote well-being by providing opportunities for clients to spend time outdoors while waiting to be seen.

Week #4: Landscape architecture students constructed models showing how each group would solve 'the problem' they had set forth, such as provide a safe play area attached to the agency. Social work students finalized their research. On Friday of week #4, students presented models and poster mockups for peer-review.

Week #5: Landscape architecture students finalized their group models based on peer-review comments. Social work students completed their poster narratives and added photos of the finished models to their academic posters. Students displayed their final projects to an audience of 100 educators from various disciplines across the university.

Evaluation Tools

Students completed two evaluation instruments to rate their team member(s) and to offer a reflection of their learning experience during the project. These instruments were a peer evaluation and the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). At weeks

2 and 3 of the project, students completed a peer evaluation to help identify areas of progress and areas for growth with their assigned partners. The peer evaluation was comprised of two sections that allowed students to rate the performance of their partner on a scale of 1 to 100 and offer narrative feedback to explain their rating. At the end of the project, students completed the Critical Incident Questionnaire, comprised of five open-ended questions. Developed by Brookfield (1995), this instrument is designed to help students articulate their learning experience through commentary that is “regularly solicited and anonymously given” (p. 114). Although the instrument was administered once, the students provided detailed responses to help explain the strengths, challenges, and successes of the project. Specifically, the CIQ prompted students to reflect on the total learning experience and answer five questions:

1. At what moment(s) have you felt most engaged with what was happening in the learning environment?
2. At what moment(s) have you felt most distanced from what was happening in the learning environment?
3. What action(s) that anyone took during the collaboration exercises did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action(s) that anyone took during the collaboration exercises did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. About the interdisciplinary collaboration, what project surprised you most?

Combined, these instruments were useful for assessing the overall learning experience for this project.

RESULTS

Sample of CIQ Comments from Students

The following comments represent direct feedback from students. The two

most common responses are shared for each category.

Engaged: “I enjoyed designing solutions and sharing new ideas for playgrounds.” “I felt most engaged when I worked on the model with my whole group.”

Distanced: “I felt most distanced when my partner didn’t show up.” “I felt most distanced when my ideas were not used.”

Helpful: “It was helpful when my partner taught me about landscape architecture.” “It was very helpful when my partner sent text messages about the project.”

Confusing: “I wasn’t sure how to put the model and the poster together.” “I didn’t know what my professor really wanted from me.”

Surprised: “I was surprised at how friendly students from social work were.” “I enjoyed doing the project, because it helped me understand macro practice and community organizing.”

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the analysis of the peer review and CIQ evaluation instruments. We highlight students’ responses that show evidence of learning and change of attitude regarding collaboration. Table 1 shows the demographics of the two classes.

Helpful actions were noted in both surveys. Thirty-seven students out of 53 reported that their partner taught them about the other’s discipline, shared facts, and provided helpful feedback. This inaugural project shed light on the fact that students from starkly different disciplines had little to no experience working together. This project fostered a wider community network of professionals outside their specific discipline.

Student’s comments about areas of confusion on the CIQ suggested that students were divided in their opinions about how smoothly the project went. Thirty-two peer review comments and 21 CIQ comments indicated that sharing ideas and visions near the beginning of the project went

Table 1
Student Demographics

	Social Work		Landscape Architecture		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Freshmen	-	-	26	5	31
Upperclassmen	1	21	-	-	22

smoothly. Toward the end of the project technical glitches contributed to the feeling of confusion for eight students, who reported feeling distanced. Nineteen students reported using technology to keep connected. Further study needs to be conducted to understand students' preferred use of technology. Some modifications of the CIQ may be needed to define the difference between what causes a feeling of being distanced, what is confusing, and what is helpful in the collaborative studio. The CIQ, administered at the end of the project, also recorded comments expressing uncertainty over the end result of the project.

Only the CIQ recorded students' comments regarding surprise. Twenty-four students reported they felt the project was successful and, in the end, they enjoyed it. The professor's directions were unique to each project; it was confusing for some students who were trained to follow a rubric or explicit class-wide directions. But results of this pedagogy allowed each group to produce a project uniquely suited for their agency. In the end, students reported that they realized their disciplines were intertwined.

In the open-ended peer review comments, 32 students noted their partners had great ideas. Several students would have preferred to work with the same class level, i.e., freshmen prefer to work with freshmen. This is a valid comment and one that might lead to a future collaboration with students paired based on level of skill in their discipline. Students felt they would have benefited from more explicit direction from the instructors, but in the end, all but three acknowledged that they achieved a unique solution (different from the others) that fit the needs of their own agency. Overall, students' CIQ comments were positive. They

echoed the peer-review evaluations that stated their partners had "great ideas."

Student Achievement

Service learning enhanced social work students' knowledge of professional agencies and community resources. Experiential learning fostered an awareness of how they might affect their client's physical or emotional well-being and encouraged learning through appropriate case assignments and peer-group interactions. At the end of five weeks, social work students were able to document their findings and display them at university-sponsored workshops. Social work students successfully coordinated this project with freshmen from a different academic discipline and way of thinking, and all students strengthened their leadership and communication skills. Professors found experiential learning to be an asset to teaching, because it provides exposure to new ways of thinking and working collaboratively with others. Similarly, students learned to navigate the challenges that emerged during this experience. Powell et al. (2008) highlighted the implications of communication and building strong relationships as a necessity for moving from "cooperation to coordination to collaboration" (p. 37).

The learning objectives were achieved, because students learned to communicate in visual, oral, and written forms. These skills are vital to the success of freshmen in landscape architecture and to the social work students nearing matriculation into the workforce or graduate education. This project elevated the level of responsibility typically placed on students by requiring all of them to be responsible for their individual and collective actions. Professors required students to consider thoughtfully

the characteristics that make outdoor spaces restorative. Landscape architecture students were able to respond to the social work students' needs assessment of the agency where they served. They worked collaboratively with the social work students to identify positive interventions they might make for clients. They researched restorative spaces based on biophilic design principles, and then shared their findings through well-crafted presentations. They constructed three-dimensional models of playgrounds and completed their project responsibilities on time. This is indicative of social and emotional learning expectations and outcomes that promote academic, social, and emotional learning (Resnik, 2016). This is an accomplishment for freshmen and represents an outcome of interdisciplinary collaboration. While foster care and other themes of the CRP book were familiar to the upper division social work students, it was new to all but one of the freshmen landscape architecture students. Stone et al. (2008) championed the importance of raising student awareness of different professional role orientations in a collaborative partnership. Interdisciplinary collaboration made this project real for the landscape students, thus making *Three Little Words: A Memoir* a successful teaching tool for these undergraduates.

Limitations

Two primary project limitations were identified. The first concerns the potential value of using the CIQ earlier in the course. Using our peer-review rubric during weeks 2 and 3 of the project offered little insight on personal reflection held by the students. Using the CIQ earlier in the semester may have provided more opportunity for student reflection as well as feedback to improve teaching and to adjust to students' different learning styles. For example, in their reflection, students expressed a desire for more direction at the beginning of the project to help guide their work. If this information surfaced earlier in the course through administration of the CIQ, some of

the frustrations shared by the students during the initial phase of the project could have been addressed in real time. Another limitation was the pairing of advanced and novice students. Students expressed a desire to work with peers at a similar level to help mitigate the information chasm that often exists between freshmen and upper-level students.

CONCLUSION

This article reported on the successful use of a common reading program book to enhance established curriculums and strengthen interdisciplinary approaches for teaching complex cultural and ethical issues. This unique project responded to the CRP book's topic, i.e., foster care, and benefitted from a close collaboration with professors and students in social work and landscape architecture. Students focused their attention on a single issue—acknowledging the important role the physical environment plays in maximizing child outcomes in all developmental domains. Students recognized that the book's main characters, who were institutionalized in the foster care system, could have benefitted from restorative outdoor play areas. To this end, students researched award-winning playgrounds known to have restorative properties for children experiencing high levels of stress. Students worked with nine social service agencies in the community to propose enhanced spaces aimed at helping clients mitigate stress in their life situations and promote wellness. Partnerships like this help strengthen ties between the university and local social service agencies. Final group projects were displayed at three university-sponsored CRP workshops attended by over 100 faculty members, university administrators, and professional social workers. Participation in the CRP interdisciplinary project has had a positive effect on students' baccalaureate education by fostering collaboration and networking outside of their chosen discipline.

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