

Health Education in Practice

Teaching Idea

Promoting Social and Health Advocacy in the Classroom Through Service Learning

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Abstract

The ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health represents an essential skill for a health literate individual. By providing opportunities to successfully engage in health advocacy and service learning activities, students may be motivated to become life-long advocates for health and continue to actively advocate and participate in activities to support health education and health care services. Similarly, service learning pedagogy is used in K-12 schools to enhance traditional modes of learning, actively engage students in their own education through experiential learning in course relevant contexts, and foster lifelong connections between students, their communities, and the world outside the classroom.

Promoting Social and Health Advocacy in the Classroom through Service Learning is a strategy that provides K-12 and college-aged students in a variety of classroom settings the opportunity to advocate and communicate for positive health in their communities as well as participate in age-appropriate civic service activities, thus enhancing the development of responsible, productive citizens and effective communicators. This teaching technique links classroom content within a variety of course content areas with the spirit of advocacy, volunteerism, service learning, and community service.

Introduction

The Joint Committee on Health Education and Promotion Terminology proposes that advocacy is the process "by which the actions of individuals or groups attempt to bring about social and/or organizational change on behalf of a particular goal, program, interest, or population" (Joint Committee on Health Education and Promotion Terminology, 2002, p. 5). The ability to advocate for personal, family, and community

health represents an essential skill for a health literate individual (Tappe & Galer-Unti, 2001). Health literacy has been defined as the capacity of individuals to obtain, interpret, and understand basic health information and services, and the competence to use such information and services in ways that enhance health (Joint Committee on Health Education Terminology, 1991; Joint Committee on Health Education Terminology, 2002). The newly revised eight national health education standards are derived from the definition of health literacy, which describe what K-12 students should know about health as well as what health education should enable students to do. The standards identify the knowledge and skills essential for the development of health literacy and provide a framework from which to develop curricula and programs. Standard eight emphasizes that health-literate students should be able to demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and community health (Joint Committee on National Health Education Standards, 2007).

Many classrooms and student organizations participate in service activities on a yearly basis. Linking such activities to classroom content can enhance learning through reflective and experiential processes. Service learning is defined as a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities (Fiske, 2002). Service learning is a form of experiential learning that may employ various forms of community service activities as a vehicle for enhancing the learning of the behavioral concept of health advocacy (Peterson, Cooper, & Laird, 2001). Service learning pedagogy is used by teachers in colleges and universities as well as in K-12 schools to enhance traditional modes of learning, actively engage students in their own education through experiential learning in course relevant contexts, and foster lifelong connections between students, their communities, and the world outside the classroom. Service learning has been shown to be an effective strategy for promoting the importance of civic service, civic and social responsibility, volunteerism, and health advocacy (Youress, McLellan, & Yates, 1999). Youth who are given the opportunity for volunteer community service tend to perform better in school, feel more positive about themselves, have a more positive work ethic, and develop a more socially responsible attitude as adults (Moore & Allen, 1996). Students involved in health advocacy and community service opportunities on a regular, periodic basis across the K-12 school curriculum may experience enhanced

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self-esteem and self efficacy, as well as be less inclined to engage in risky problem behaviors (Blum, 1998; Scales, 1990; Youress et al., 1999). Providing young people with opportunities to contribute to the social good of family or community (via health advocacy opportunities), may also contribute to enhanced youth resiliency (Blum). Service learning is thus a unique pedagogical strategy for promoting social and health advocacy in classroom instruction both at the university and K-12 levels. It allows students to “pack their parachutes” with unique experiences, critical thinking skills, changed beliefs, and knowledge to jump successfully into life’s challenges (Griffith, 2005).

Teachers have a limited amount of time to teach the required curricula within an academic year. Additionally, the pressures of high standardized test scores may drive the curricula being taught in the classroom and therefore non-content specific activities may not be readily adopted. This pedagogical strategy contains multiple student benefits, addresses a national health education standard, and can be easily incorporated into any classroom content area and setting.

Activity Objectives

Upon completion of this activity, students should be able to:

1. Recognize and explain the importance of promoting good health within one’s community.
2. Identify the steps to an effective advocacy process (Grade 4-8; 9-12; and college).
3. Volunteer his/her time toward the completion of a chosen health advocacy activity/project.
4. Evaluate his/her experiences in health advocacy through oral and/or written assessments.

Materials and Resources

The materials and resources needed vary dependent upon the activity/project chosen. It is encouraged that the classroom teacher be familiar with the social and health-related organizations and agencies available as resources within the local community as well as various upcoming health-related events to be hosted in the community. Moreover, the teacher may need to establish contact with local health-related agencies and/or local businesses prior to introducing this lesson to determine possible volunteer activities, time constraints, scheduling conflicts, etc. that may influence the implementation of the chosen advocacy activities.

Target Population

This activity can be used with students of all ages and grade levels, kindergarten through college. However, younger populations, kindergarten through third grade, may be more successful when participating in a large group or whole class

activity. Students in grades 4-8 may benefit from participation in individual or whole class activities. Students within the secondary and college classrooms should participate in individual activities.

Procedure

Within this instructional activity, students are required to participate in an activity, project or event that promotes good individual, family, and/or community health. This pedagogical strategy is unique in that the chosen project is then linked with relevant course content. Additionally, a reflective assessment concludes this instructional activity. Depending upon the unique setting of each school, teachers may require students to participate in one activity, project or event per 6-week or 9-week grading period, per semester or per year.

The classroom teacher should begin this instructional activity by age-appropriately defining the term advocacy and the steps to effective advocacy. The steps are: define the problem; identify the audience; create a plan; locate resources; implement action; and evaluate/reflect on one’s efforts (Andrews, n.d.). A discussion should follow that provides an age-appropriate description of various community needs (define the problem), important issues that influence the health status of community members (identify the target), and a description of the social and health-related services and agencies available in the local area (locate resources). Similarly, a class discussion should develop in which the importance of helping others and advocating for good health is addressed. Students are asked to brainstorm for ways in which to advocate for or promote good individual, family, and community health. For example, students may suggest various implementation plans such as coordinating a canned food drive for needy families; coordinating a toy drive for children during the holiday season; organizing a “clean-up day” to remove trash, debris, and/or graffiti within a local park; volunteering at a health agency or health-related event; or raising money to donate toward a health issue. See Figure 1 for a sample listing of large group/whole class and individual activities. Similarly, Figure 2 represents a sample listing of age-appropriate activities for grades K-3, 4-8, 9-12, and college-aged students.

When having the students participate in a whole class activity (grades K-3 or grades 4-8), allow the class to choose the advocacy activity from the list of brainstormed examples by assessing which activities meet the most important needs of the community. After narrowing down to two or three activities, the class should make a final decision by means of a class vote.

When having students participate in an individual advocacy activity (grades 4-8, 9-12 and college), have the students decide upon their activity of choice by examining the primary areas of community need and/or establishing a persuasive argument for why a particular activity is critical to establishing good individual, family, or community health.

Large Group/Whole Class Activities

- Collect canned food for a local food bank or homeless shelter during holiday season as well as times other than the holiday season
- Conduct a book drive for children's hospital
- Organize a school-wide or community-wide gently used eyeglasses drive
- Organize a toy drive for children in need
- Conduct a coat drive for families in need
- Conduct a clothing drive for local battered women's shelter and/or families in need
- Organize a school-wide fitness walk sponsored by health-related agencies or organizations such as the Walk for Diabetes
- Write a "class letter" to a legislator in support of a health-related bill
- Organize a "clean-up day" to remove trash, debris, and/or graffiti in local community parks/areas

Individual Activities

- Research a health issue and raise money to donate toward that issue
- Volunteer at a local social or health agency or organization such as Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, Ronald McDonald House, or any health-care setting such as a hospital or nursing home
- Volunteer at a health-related event/fair
- Write a legislator in support of a health-related bill
- Contribute time and resources to natural disaster relief efforts
- Serve as an educational mentor for academically at-risk youth within an after-school program
- Serve as a social mentor to behaviorally at-risk youth within an after-school program
- Donate Blood (appropriate for students aged 18+ years)

Figure 1. Large group/whole class and individual advocacy activities

Grades K-3

- Collect canned food for a local food bank or homeless shelter
- Conduct a book drive for children's hospital or day care center
- Organize a toy drive for children in need during holiday season
- Conduct a coat drive for children during the winter months

Grades 4-8

- Organize a school-wide food drive for the local food bank or homeless shelter
- Research a particular health issue and raise money to donate to the particular issue
- Organize a school-wide or community-wide "fun run" sponsored by health agency or organization such as the Walk for Diabetes
- Write a class letter to a legislator in support of a health-related bill
- Organize a gently used eyeglasses drive for needy children
- Organize a school-wide or neighborhood-wide community clean-up day

Grades 9-12

- Write an individual letter to a legislator in support of a health-related bill
- Volunteer at a health-related agency or organization
- Volunteer at health-related events such as a "fun run" or educational health fair
- Serve as an educational mentor for academically at-risk youth within an after-school program
- Serve as a social mentor to behaviorally at-risk youth within an after-school program

College Students

- Donate blood, platelets, or plasma
- Volunteer at a health agency or organization
- Volunteer at local health-related events
- Organize a university-wide educational health fair
- Serve as an educational mentor for academically at-risk youth within an after-school program
- Serve as a social mentor to behaviorally at-risk youth within an after-school program

Figure 2. Age-appropriate advocacy activities

Next, student(s) should create a plan and implement their chosen activity. For example, a high school student enrolled in an environmental health class may decide to organize a "clean-up day" to remove litter and graffiti from the local park near the school campus. This chosen project would require the student to complete most if not all tasks outside of the classroom. To begin this project, the student will need to effectively communicate how this activity promotes individual, family, and community health as well as various environmental health issues to a variety of individuals to include city officials and business leaders. To assist the student with implementation he/she should create an outline of tasks to accomplish prior to completing this activity. For example, he/she may need to contact a city representative to discuss the proper bureaucratic procedures associated with graffiti removal; contact a local business to donate paint and other supplies necessary for graffiti and trash removal; and recruit volunteers from the school campus and surrounding community. This project may take the student several weeks to organize and implement. Upon conclusion of the project the student should complete an evaluation to assess his/her efforts.

The implementation of health advocacy activities can extend beyond the health classroom into other content areas such as mathematics and language arts. For example, a 5th grade mathematics classroom may choose to organize a fundraiser such as a walk-a-thon from which the money will be donated to a chosen health issue. For each 100 steps walked, solicited donors will donate X-amount. Students are provided pedometers and asked to walk for Y-minutes during the scheduled mathematics class on a specified day. Upon completion of the timed walk, students log the number of steps taken. Various mathematical calculations can be completed to include the dollar amount solicited from each donor, the total amount of funds collected by each student, and the total amount of funds collected by the entire class. Additional mathematics concepts to explore may include the average miles per hour walked by each student, the average dollar amount of funds collected, the percent of funds collected by male students versus female students, etc. The total time necessary to complete this activity is approximately one week which includes researching the health issues (1-2 class periods); creating a persuasive donor solicitation statement as well as the creation of a donor collection card (1 class period); the solicitation of at least 3 donors (2-3 days outside of class); the scheduling of the walk-a-thon event and collection of pedometers by the instructor (2-3 days outside of class); the walk-a-thon event (1 class period); the completion of various mathematical calculations (1 class period); and the completion of the advocacy assessment reflection activity (1 class period).

Similarly, an 8th grade language arts classroom may choose to write a set of individual letters to political leaders in support of a chosen health-related bill. Within this activity, students review the proper steps required to complete a formal letter and persuasive essay. The students research various health-related bills via the internet. Each student

chooses one bill and write a formal support letter to his/her representative. The total time necessary to complete this activity is approximately one week which includes reviewing the steps to writing a formal letter and persuasive essay (1 class period); researching various health-related bills (1 class period); drafting an outline and first draft of letter, proof-reading draft letter, and creating a final version of letter (2-3 class periods); and completing the advocacy assessment reflection activity (1 class period).

Assessment Techniques

The final step in an effective advocacy process is to evaluate, assess, or reflect upon one's efforts (Andrews, n.d.). The assessment techniques utilized in the instructional activity are dependent upon the age of the participants. For students in kindergarten or first grade, have each student draw a picture of the activity that they completed. Next, have each student show his/her drawing to the class while stating one thing that they liked about participating in this activity. To conclude a discussion on the importance of helping others should occur. As described above, this activity could easily be incorporated into an art lesson.

For students in second and third grade, have each student trace around his/her hand on a single sheet of 8 ½ by 11 inch paper. On the palm of the drawn hand, have the students write down the name and/or description of the activity completed. On each of the four fingers have the students list a positive experience or something good that they learned as a result of participating in the activity. On the thumb have students state why this activity is important. Place each student's hand drawing on a bulletin board titled, "Helping Hands." To conclude a discussion which elaborates on the importance of helping others and advocating for good health should occur. As described, this activity could easily be incorporated into an art or enrichment lesson.

Students in grades 4-8 should reflect on their experiences within a journal writing activity. Issues that should be addressed in the journal assessment include: a description of the advocacy activity; a listing of positive experiences learned as a result of participation; a discussion on the easiest and most difficult parts of the activity; a discussion of why this project was important to the health of individuals and community members; a discussion of one's feelings after completing this activity; and a discussion as to how this advocacy activity promoted good individual, family, or community health. As described above, this activity could be incorporated into a language arts or social studies lesson.

Students in high school and college should not only submit a detailed reflection journal as described above, but also maintain an advocacy log sheet which details each activity completed, the time required to complete the activity, and a confirmation of activity completion. Examples of activity confirmation include an agency or event supervisor's signature for students who volunteer time and service to a social or health-related agency or event; and documentation of work completed for students who organize

group participation in a health-related event. As described above, this activity could be incorporated into a language arts, sociology, or civics class. Additionally, many high schools require students to complete civic service hours each year prior to graduation. Participation in activities such as those listed in Figures 1 and 2 could be utilized by students for civic service credit hours.

Conclusion

Promoting Social and Health Advocacy in the Classroom through Service Learning is an instructional strategy designed to promote the importance of responsible, productive, and civically minded citizenry among K-12 and college-aged youth. Providing students with opportunities to effectively advocate for social and health-related issues serves to enhance the student health literacy standards of K-12 classroom students. This pedagogical idea is unique in that it links classroom content with the spirit of advocacy, volunteerism, service learning, and community service through worthy and deserving projects developed by teachers and their students across the curriculum.

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