Adventure-Based Service Learning: University Students' Self-Reflection Accounts of Service With Children

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The need to provide alternative and exciting community service-learning experiences with university students has been a challenge to institutions of higher education. One institution was able to capitalize on an idea of integrating challenge and adventure-based activities as a form of community service. This article focuses on undergraduate university students' self-reflections, and outcomes regarding their learning experiences as facilitators in a challenge and adventure-based team-building, low ropes community service-learning course. Three emerging themes were analyzed regarding views of community service, and perceptions of the influences the course had on both university and elementary school students. Suggestions for future research on adventure-based community service-learning courses are discussed.

Keywords: Adventure-Based Education, Community Service Learning, Challenge Course

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Many institutions of higher education have struggled to instill a sense of “service to community” in educating their students. Many require students to complete community service hours through participation in community service-learning projects, either as part of a course, or as an organized activity by the “Community Service Learning Program” as part of their graduation requirement. The service-learning projects in which students participate vary from volunteering in schools, to assisting in various social service agencies. Service-learning activities are a form of experiential education that address both human and community needs, with structured opportunities that are designed to intentionally promote student learning and development (Jacoby, 1996).

The learning outcomes associated with service learning promote civic responsibility, engagement, participation in the community, personal development, and enhancement of learning occurs (Fredric & Reiher, 2001; Waterman, 1997). Experiential learning can be defined as learning through action, or learning by doing. Experience alone is insufficient to ensure that learning takes place. A need exists to integrate the new experience with past experiences through the process of reflection. It is the reflection that turns experiences into experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

Community service learning is grounded in Dewey’s assessment that learning is most effective when there is context in both application and experience, and that schools should be organized into democratic communities (Dewey, 1956). Researchers have said that service learning is most often defined as a pedagogical technique for combining authentic community service with integrated outcomes (Erickson & Anderson, 1997, p. 1). When individuals are involved in service learning they develop collaboration, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills needed to become contributing members of society and successful learners (Myers & Pickeral, 1997). The National and Community Service Act of 1990, as amended through December 17, 1999, P.L., 106-170, defines service learning as an educational experience, not community service learning where:

1. Students learn to develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and are coordinated in collaboration with school and community;

2. That is integrated into the students’ academic curriculum and provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write
about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;

3. That provides students with the opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and

4. That enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community, and helps foster the development of a sense of caring for others (1999, p. 5).

The 1993 Federal and National Community Service Trust Act further supports the planning and implementation of service-learning programs. Keeping in mind the previously described definition, most institutions of higher education arrange their service-learning programs through the Office of Community Service Learning, or through student affairs programs. In many instances, community service learning is part of a course in which some type of service is required, or a community service-learning course is designated as a stand-alone course. The focus, in many instances, includes facilitator development and practice, as well as an opportunity to evaluate university students’ service-learning experiences.

While most courses require some type of student self-reflection in the evaluation of their courses, they do not measure university student performance or effectiveness of the agency in which the service learning takes place (private or public). It is important to know the goals and objectives of the service-learning program and how these goals will be evaluated (LaMaster, 2001). University student self-reflections provide information regarding social attitudes, evolving leadership skills, and perceptions toward the community (Frederickson, 2000; Harrison, 1987; McEwen, 1996). Self-reports can also assess self-esteem and learning outcomes when service learning is part of a university course.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was threefold: First, to analyze the university students’ “self-reflection” essays of their experience in a community service-learning course. Second, to examine the relationships formed by university students with elementary school children as a result of participation in the team-building/low ropes challenge community service-learning course. Third, to examine the influence the team-building/low ropes challenge community service-learning course outcomes had on university students and on their perceptions of community service learning. The research questions that guided this inquiry were: What did university students experience while conducting a team-building/low ropes course
with elementary school children as part of a community service-learning project? What skills did they learn? What types of personal and interpersonal development did students reflectively attribute to their service-learning experiences? Did university students experience personal growth as a result of working with the elementary school children? If so, how do they describe the positive or negative developmental outcomes? What impact did the ropes course have on elementary school students as perceived by the university students?

There is an ongoing search for ways to evaluate service-learning program outcomes and the effects they have on faculty, university student facilitators, and the clients for whom they provide the service. However, evaluating the outcomes of both facilitators and participants can provide better insights into how to plan and implement future service-learning programs.

**An Adventure-Based Team-Building and Low Ropes Course: A Community Service-Learning Adventure**

As a component of a university-wide effort to provide community service-learning experiences during the interim semester, the Office of Community Service Learning at a small liberal arts university developed a partnership with several agencies, including a local elementary school. University students were required to complete at least 80 hours of community service. The first author developed a credit/no credit, two-unit four-week course titled, “Developing Leadership Skills Through Team-Building/Low Ropes Course.”

University students were to plan and implement an adventure-based education program with fourth and fifth grade elementary school children. Course requirements were to learn the philosophy of experiential education and adventure-based programs, plan and implement a half-day program to include an orientation, a campus tour, team-building games and initiatives, and learn how to construct and facilitate a low ropes course. The learning outcomes of the course were to increase both university and elementary school students' personal confidence, mutual support within groups, develop an increased level of agility and physical coordination, and to cultivate leadership skills. The learning outcomes reinforce research studies that indicate that traditional outdoor activities, creative course presentation, and structured and nonstructured games are found to be effective in producing experiential education activities that result in personal and interpersonal development (Martin, 2001; Martin, Leberman, & Neill, 2002).

The community-based service-learning course was offered during a four-week interim semester from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., Monday through
Friday, at a small liberal arts university. University students completed a standardized course evaluation as part of the traditional university requirements. For the purpose of this study, a separate self-reflection essay was submitted. The course was taught by the first author a former faculty in the School of Education, who has extensive experience in experiential education and adventure-based programs. Course material was presented through class lectures, demonstrations, and a debriefing of the daily experiences.

For the first two weeks, university students participated and received training on concepts of experiential education, sequenced games and initiatives, and learned how to facilitate a low-element ropes challenge course. A low-rope, team-building challenge course is a series of ropes or cables attached to fixed structures (posts or trees), and incorporates obstacles that are physically and psychologically challenging to overcome. The ropes are suspended 3–4 feet above the ground. The challenge course is designed to develop group cohesiveness, and all activities are done as a group (Rohnke, 1984). Although in most cases the course or activities are completed individually, the support of the team members is highly encouraged for both moral support and safety (Rohnke, 1989).

During the last two weeks of the course, six fourth and six fifth grade classrooms from a local elementary school (designated a Title I school) each visited the university campus for two days and participated in the various planned activities. Approximately 700 elementary school children participated during the two interim semesters while this study was conducted. The first day consisted of an orientation describing program goals and objectives, a campus tour, participation in sequenced games and initiatives, and a debriefing of the day's activities.

The second day consisted of a continuation of team-building activities and participation in a low ropes challenge course and debriefing of the activities. All activities were conducted in a playfield area in a grove of trees where a portable ropes course was constructed and taken down on a daily basis. After the elementary school children left the university campus, the university students participated in a debriefing session and talked about their own experiences. The university students made future recommendations on how to improve their teaching and services to children.

Method

Sample and Data Collection

The data collection process for this study is similar to the one described in Carlson and McKenna (2000). A convenience sample consisting of all the participants' self-reflection reports was utilized. There were a total of 30 participants, 13 during the 1997 interim semester and
17 during the 1999 interim semester. Seventeen students were male and 13 were female. All university students enrolled in the course participated and consented to having their information used as part of the study. The confidentiality of participants was recognized and students were free to withdraw their essays from the sample at any time. University students were instructed to write essays reflecting on their own experiences during the community service-learning course in light of the project's basic research questions.

University students addressed the following questions: What was your experience in conducting a team-building/low ropes experiential education course with elementary school children as part of your community service project? What skills did you learn? What types of personal and interpersonal development do you attribute to your community service-learning experiences? Did you experience personal growth as a result of working with the elementary school children? If so, describe the positive or negative developmental learning outcomes? What impact did the experiential education community service-learning course have on you and on the elementary school children based on your perceptions? The essays were submitted at the end of the four-week class.

**Content Analysis**

An essential aspect of experiential learning is the search for patterns that unite previously isolated incidents. This search for patterns is undertaken to explore whether or not emotions, thoughts, behaviors or observations occur with some regularity (Kolb, 1984; Luckner & Nadler, 1997). The data for the present study were analyzed qualitatively using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) method of unitizing and categorizing components. The essays were read and re-read separately by the two authors to assure some measure of coding reliability. The contents of the essays were independently marked and coded in an effort to discover conceptual categories and themes in the student reflections. The researchers then met to compare their individual coding efforts, and a set of common analytic categories emerged.

All the coded sections of these essays were placed in their respective "provisional categories" using the method of constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The process was intended to inductively discover the "latent content" of the student reflections (Babbie, 1999). How did the university students understand their experience during the four-week course? How did they interpret the meaning of the time spent learning the ropes course and their team-building efforts with the elementary school children? This analytic process initially yielded nine categories for coding the data. Through further analysis it was evident that within the nine categories, three general themes could be used to organize and interpret the data contained in the students' reflective accounts.
Results

Data for this study were described in terms of three main areas: (a) Cognition and Growth, (b) Collaborative Skills, and (c) Reflection and Meta-Cognition. These three phenomena are explored in relation to the proposed learning outcomes of the course and the basic research questions.

Cognition and Growth

“Cognition and Growth” relates to the outcomes learned through course lectures, readings, and experiential activities, including working with the children. The university students' accounts of their experiences point to lessons they learned, and ways they grew and developed as a consequence of their participation in the community service-learning course. They reflected on the purpose of experiential education, the purpose of utilizing the team-building/low ropes course as an instructional tool to develop and teach leadership, communication, self-confidence, and development of trust through various experiential activities. Many of the participants tended to view community service learning as a way to help others and to fulfill their civic responsibility. They wrote about their desire for future involvement and expressed the conviction that working with children was the best way of serving their community.

Changing their minds about community service learning. Most students confessed to an initial apprehension about their work with the children followed by a genuine investment in their new role as a leader and a teacher. One student indicates:

I was a bit apprehensive about what the program would entail and how the children would react under my guidance. The usage of the term “at-risk students” was also another source of apprehension for me. That is to say, I was not sure I would be able to provide the environment which these kids needed to have—a positive and confidence-building experience.

For some participants the community service-learning course changed previously held perceptions of community service learning as a “mandatory requirement” versus “wanting to actually participate in it.” One participant reflected a change of understanding:

I have always viewed community service learning [CSL] as being a very unimportant thing, and I have participated in many different community service-learning activities. Although I did see the great importance of CSL, I could never fully motivate myself to go out on my own and volunteer my time; most of the activities that I participated in were because I had to do it
for some reason or another. It always felt like an obligation and nothing more. For me it was always a requirement; I took this course because it was a requirement to graduate. But this view that I have held on to for such a long time completely changed because of this CSL experience. It was like none I have ever been a part of and it changed everything for me. I see CSL as something different now.

**Using the ropes course to build community.** Participants described the purpose of utilizing the team-building/low ropes course as a means of creating and building “community.” In several accounts, participants showed their knowledge of many of the games, the low ropes elements and their rationale for particular activities. The concept of “sequencing” played an important role in building their own community of learners when working with their groups of elementary school children. One student described the experience:

The ropes course leadership class is a worthwhile opportunity to create a greater sense of self. It helps children attain their team-working skills, as well as communicate and build self-esteem all at the same time. Using games that build on each other.... The games that are played consist of warm-up activities; then we move to ice-breakers, we then move to “de-inhibitizers,” communication activities, then problem-solving. Finally came the trust activities that include the low ropes games.

**Collaborative Skills**

“Collaborative Skills” are defined as engagement activities that resulted in collaborative relationship outcomes between university students, perceptions of the impact they believed they had on the elementary school children, and the impact the elementary school children had on them. This category had the highest coding incident rate. The university students wrote about their “collaboration” and “engagement” with each other and with the elementary school children. These working and playing relationships were at the heart of their experience and were the key elements of much of their learning. The activities required them to collaborate both mentally and physically. As they learned to work with and understand their fellow college students and the elementary school children, their self-awareness also increased. One student explains:

I found that I was not just the teacher of the class but I was also a student, because I learned so much from interacting with them. I learned how to
communicate with other people in a group setting. I learned how to be a better listener. I learned how to be more patient with children younger than me and, most important, I learned how to trust them the same way they trusted me.

**Elementary school children's impact on university students.** Among the lessons learned from the elementary school children were patience, persistence, tolerance, flexibility and how to have fun. In particular, two students share the following:

I bet the students that I encountered in the ropes course program never realized that they would have an effect on my life, but they did. They helped me discover that people are different and need to be understood and handled in different ways.

Seeing the kids walk toward you, the noise, the loudness, it's like an infantry of troops but the air is filled with kid noises. It seems like the closer they get to you the faster and louder they become. But it's when they get next to you; a great feeling inside you says, "kids are great; let's do this!"

**University students' perceptions of their impact on elementary school children.** In reflecting on the lessons learned by the elementary school children they served, the university students recognized the mutual give and take between both groups. As the children benefitted so did their teachers, as the following attests:

It is hard to say who benefitted the most from this activity. I got so much out of this class, while at the same time the students did also. In the end, I would have to say the elementary students benefitted the most. They were the ones that gained the most experience in dealing with different scenarios of problem-solving and trust-building activities. Through these activities I think the elementary students learned a lot about themselves and who they are. They also learned about their classmates, and who they can trust when similar situations arise.

I saw a little of myself within each and every child. Our objective was to teach these kids some valuable lessons about life. We wanted to teach them to work with other people who may be different than them. We wanted them to walk away with a sense of pride; that no matter what obstacle lay in the way, they would be able to succeed. Then finally, we wanted them to have fun. The truth is we also learned those same lessons.
Relationships are the key to success. The significance of relationships is a primary factor in the university students' accounts of what went on in their community service-learning experience. How they interacted with the children, how the children got along among themselves, and how the university student teams worked together, served as their indicators of success or failure in the team-building activities. It is through relationships that the university students are changed, and it is through relationships that they are able to offer something positive to the children. Their accounts offer many stories about making connections with others:

Community service can be very rewarding.... Some of the children became attached to us as soon as they learned our names. These children were easier to work with because they listened better. Another rewarding part of having worked with children was when it came time for them to leave. Before they lined up with their teachers to go back to school, they ran and gave us hugs. This was an incredible feeling. I felt like I had touched the lives of these children in one way or another.

Student accounts are frequently framed in terms of the strategies they employed to improve the performance of the teams and the behavior of particular individuals. For example:

The value of teamwork was reinforced throughout our teaching. When one kid would try to step aside and not participate in all of the activities, we could simply say one word, "team." Usually, when the idea was presented that they would not be part of the team if they didn't help, the children would do whatever it took to participate.

In each group, there were some children who seemed to hang back from the rest of the pack, not making any attempt to join with the others. We were able to glorify these kids, praising them for a job well done in front of the others, or give them special attention that they might not normally receive. A kid that was mute at the beginning of the day was usually running rampant and playing with others after one hug or a round of applause from the teacher.

Problematic situations are those characterized by a lack of teamwork and a lack of togetherness. Strategies are employed to improve the relationships within the group, and success is defined as a group that has a common focus and everyone is part of the team:
The second group was very difficult because they either weren't interested, or they were mad at one of the other group leaders, or they were tired. I was fond of the children individually but as a group they just stunk. We tried numerous techniques such as time-outs, talking to them, etc.; they just couldn't get anything right as a team. The harder we pressed, the more they seemed to resist. So my fellow group leaders and I felt defeated after that first day. But I had to remind myself that this was our first time as instructors and it might be necessary to reorganize the order of the activities to enhance student involvement and enthusiasm.

Success was noted in individual cases as well as in the performance of the teams. At the end of the day, the benefits of community service learning for these university students are measured in the faces of the children they served:

In a couple of cases, the children would want to give up when they came to a difficult spot while crossing the wire cables. It was rewarding to see them not give up because of a couple of motivational cheers from us as well as their peers. All it took [for] them [the children] to finish was to know someone believed in them.

First let me tell you about Bonnie. Bonnie was with our group but never participated in anything. She was accompanied by her teachers at all times. I thought she was just unsociable. The truth was that she had a muscular problem and was unable to participate in the exercises. By the second session, Bonnie joined us and participated in all exercises. This was amazing to see, this nice young girl, who at first felt that she couldn't do anything, jump on these ropes and walk completely across with this huge smile on her face. Bonnie was amazing.

**Reflection and Meta-Cognition**

“Reflection and Meta-Cognition” relates to the university students’ ability to reflect and learn from an event or an incident, and be able to apply the learning outcome in a new setting or a new situation. One of the criteria regarding the definition of community service learning from the 1990s National Community Service Act is that community service learning should provide students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their communities, or in the future. University students clearly saw the value of the ropes course, community service learning, and the skills learned while working with children. They
were also able to describe how the skills they learned would transfer into their future careers, or personal lives. They were able to apply the concepts in new situations. They saw the value of “transference” both in the elementary school children and themselves. The following examples illustrate this point:

The most rewarding aspect of this course was the fact that we have taught skills and lessons to children that will benefit from them throughout their lives, such as teamwork, self-esteem, physical health and problem-solving abilities.

Through these games the students learned how to work with each other. These same tactics can be used in everyday life. Students have to interact with one another everyday in the classroom and this helps them deal with each other.

For university students:

What I have learned from the course and time with the children is how to communicate with others more efficiently as a team. As a computer science major, working well with people from different walks of life is essential to the success of the company. When I graduate in May, I will be better prepared for software engineering team projects.

I know I have some stronger leadership and communication skills that I can apply when I enter the workplace in a couple of years. The skills that I picked up have allowed me to be able to better communicate with others outside the class.

Often the student accounts of their interaction with the elementary school children point to specific activities or games as examples of experiences that build skills that will be useful in the future. For example, the low ropes course was frequently understood as a metaphor for real-life situations:

The low Wallenda is a cable that is hooked up between two trees and then there is a loose rope tied to one tree. The object is to get across without falling. The participants have to realize their goal and tell themselves they can do it. One analogy that I often used with the younger children was graduation. The starting point is kindergarten, and if they want to, they can make it all the way to high school or college and graduation, which is the other tree.

Students universally commented that the games they played and the activities they facilitated for the elementary school children involved lessons
that went beyond the community service-learning course. The university students’ essays reflect their awareness of the real-life applications of what was learned. One student reflects: “I would have to say, honestly, that both children as well as the teachers benefitted equally from this class. We all took away a better sense of self and we know how to work with a team and trust one another.”

Other comments, not included, echoed similar thoughts. At times, some university students focused more on themselves, and at other times more on the elementary school children.

Discussion

The three general learning and outcome themes of cognitive growth, collaboration skills, and reflection and meta-cognition were inductively derived from reading and re-reading the university students’ reflective essays about their experiences in the community service-learning course. Selected and organized in this way, the data provided insight into the community service-learning experience from the viewpoint of the university students. We learned what they considered the most significant, most problematic, and how they interpreted particular episodes and encounters with the elementary school children, and with the structure of the games and activities.

In addition to this thematic framework, the data can also be viewed in terms of programmatic components, personal learning outcomes for participants, and interactive dynamics that pervade the accounts of this experience. For example, in terms of the programmatic components, the university students expressed apprehension, fear, and anticipation as a result of not knowing what to expect of the course and the elementary students. They were able to describe the purpose, goals and objectives, and activities of the team-building/low ropes course. They were conscious of the importance of “sequencing” the activities in order to assure success in building a sense of “team” within their respective groups. Further, they were able to provide a rationale, and give suggestions and recommendations for program improvement.

In terms of the personal learning outcomes theme, university students believed they gained leadership skills, patience, tolerance, life skills, and enhanced their ability to relate to others. They felt they were able to relate their new learning to other contexts in and outside of their school life. Many felt they now could lead activities or “step up to the occasion” if needed. Many viewed community service learning differently after having taken the course. They saw the impact the community service-learning course had on themselves and on the elementary school children. They were able to conceptualize the importance of community service learning and how it can be a tool for self-improvement, a way of “giving
back” to the community not based on an institutional requirement, but based on the needs of the community and on citizenry.

Student essays focused primarily on the interactive dynamics of their learning outcome experiences. They perceived that the learning outcomes of the community service learning course were the result of the relationships they formed with each other and with the elementary school children. They sensed that their actions had influenced the lives of the elementary school children, and they knew that the elementary school children had influenced them in return. University students felt that they had gained confidence and trust from each other, and therefore they needed to act as role models for the children. They perceived a positive impact and were able to influence the elementary school children’s attitudes and behaviors. University students commented that as a result of having worked with the elementary school children, they learned patience, tolerance, and that their social and instructional skills had improved. Further, they gained respect for educators as a result of their activities. Some even commented on their desire to pursue, or not pursue, teaching as a profession.

In summary, it is well documented that community service learning has a positive effect on both the provider and the recipient. In this case, the university students felt control of their actions. They felt a deep sense of exhilaration and cherished the engagement with the children. Further, they were involved in challenging activities, with high intrinsic motivation, and responded to the challenges that children brought with them. Therefore, the students experienced a “state of exhilaration” in an outdoor setting and an increase in cognition and engagement.

Conclusions

Additional research on the use of team-building and low ropes as a community service-learning course needs to be conducted in order to verify the importance and effectiveness of their use in institutions of higher education. It was evident from the data that the project and course had a substantial impact on the university students. It was also evident that the university students believe their community service-learning activities had a positive impact on the group of elementary school children with whom they worked.

Alternately, there is minimal data that indicate if elementary school children are influenced by university students, or how elementary school children influenced the university students’ as perceived by children themselves. Moreover, university community service-learning, team-building, low ropes programs would benefit if they set mechanisms to assess the children and their teachers to find out what impact it has on the
students' attitudes, behavior, and academic achievement in the classroom as a result of having participated in such an experience.

The community service learning was an effective way of introducing community service learning in a nontraditional classroom setting. The university students' insights into their learning experience provide compelling evidence of the effectiveness of team-building and low ropes experiential activities as a form of community service. The articulation of the framework categories regarding program components, personal outcomes, and the interactive dynamics are important for professionals in recreation, education, student services programs, and for other professionals to understand how to effectively plan community service-learning programs for university students in order to further the field of research. The results from the community service-learning course further supports service-learning concepts and programs described by Meyers and Pickeral (1997), and Lieberman and De Vos (1982) with K-12 students by undergraduate university students in which facilitators of these ropes programs observed an increase of self-esteem in their participants upon the completion of these types of service-learning projects.

Overall, the community service-learning course was well received and is still an ongoing component of the university and continues with its partnership with various local schools. The program and course continue to evolve, and it has extended its service to middle schools and high schools within the service area of the local school district. As a result of its effectiveness, the community service-learning, team-building/low ropes course is now institutionalized. What started as an idea from the primary author, and through the support of a grant received through the James Irvine Foundation, the course is now sponsored and led by staff from the Office of Student Leadership and Programs in collaboration with the Office of Community Service Learning.

References


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