Taking the Class to the Community
with Service-Learning:
Gerontological Macro
Social Work Practice

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ABSTRACT. In an effort to infuse gerontological content throughout a BSW curriculum, the College of Mount St. Joseph developed community partnerships with agencies that serve older adults. These partnerships led to specific “out-of-class” assignments in a macro social work practice class using a service-learning approach. The development and implementation of those assignments in the agency settings are described using Polvika’s Conceptual Model for Community Interagency Collaboration. The successful outcomes are described in terms of the community partnership, services and benefits provided, and the degree of satisfaction by the agencies, students, and faculty with this pedagogical method. doi:10.1300/J083v50n01_08

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INTRODUCTION

Although older persons (aged 65 and over) represent more than 13% of the United States’ population, only about 16% of baccalaureate social work (BSW) members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) identify this population as their primary clientele (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). The need for social workers to work with older adults has been well-documented (National Institute of Aging [NIA], 1987); however, research indicates that little or no gerontology content has been infused in most BSW programs (Scharlach et al., 2000). BSW programs are generalists in design and are not intended for specialization, yet students at this level should have opportunities to acquire greater knowledge and skills in aging. However, data reveal that these opportunities are quite limited (Rosen et al., 2000).

To overcome this educational gap in gerontological social work education, the John A. Hartford Foundation, in conjunction with the Council on Social Work Education, initiated the Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education Project (GeroRich) in 2002. This three-year venture provided funding for 67 baccalaureate, masters, and joint undergraduate/graduate social work programs to develop curriculum and organizational changes to ensure that gerontology pervades all social work students’ learning experiences. The College of Mount St. Joseph, a small Midwestern liberal arts and sciences college, was one of these initial 67 grantees.

As a generalist BSW program, our objective was not to have students specialize in aging studies, but rather to make certain that no social work major graduates without a solid foundation in aging competencies. In its curriculum transformation, the College focused on community partnerships to provide age-enriched learning opportunities for its BSW students. The professional academic community and community agencies are a perfect blend to inform the social work curriculum. In essence, the community agency can become the student’s classroom—in Dewey’s view, the venue for “learning by doing” (Dewey, 1938). The College strategically mandated a series of service-learning opportunities for all BSW students not only to provide exposure to social work with older adults, but also to offer real-life settings to apply skills. Even if students do not pursue a career in aging or masters in a gerontology concentration, these assignments provide each student with experiential learning in the field of aging.

This article describes how community agency partnerships enabled the College of Mount St. Joseph social work program to develop two
specific out-of-class assignments to help students learn about working with older adults. These assignments were created within a service-learning context and implemented in a macro social work practice course. The success of the community partnerships in terms of educating students as well as providing service to the agencies will be presented. This article will describe the design and implementation processes of these assignments and will discuss the evaluation of the assignments, as well as the implications for social work education.

**OUR APPROACH USING SERVICE-LEARNING TO TEACH SOCIAL WORK WITH OLDER ADULTS**

Service-learning is an approach to teaching and learning that connects classroom lessons with real needs in the community (Corporation for National and Community Service [CNS], n.d.). It is a way in which “students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content [and] a broader appreciation of the discipline” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995, p. 112). Thus, service-learning is meant to be mutually beneficial for both the provider and the recipient of the service, as well as ensuring that both the service provided and the learning that occurs receive equal attention (Furco, 1996). Bringle and Hatcher (2002) contend that service-learning is the “most meaningful way to build campus-community partnerships” (p. 513). Their argument for service-learning is that it involves both faculty and students in educationally meaningful service activities that address community concerns, while at the same time values the community professionals in these agencies as co-educators.

Studies have found that students in service-learning activities are better able to apply concepts beyond the classroom when compared with their nonparticipating peers (Rocha, 2000). Students themselves have indicated that they learned more in a course based on service-learning than in a traditional lecture-based course (Blieszner & Artale, 2001). Piner (1997) found that when students had the opportunity to apply concepts learned in class with service-learning in a gerontological setting, their future career plans were more likely to include work with older adults. Similarly, exposure to older adults through work and volunteer experiences has been cited as influencing the decision to pursue graduate study, and thus future careers, in social work with older adults (Lawrence et al., 2002). Thus, for us, service-learning appeared to be an
appropriate mechanism to help students learn competencies in gerontological social work—putting class content into meaningful practice that would benefit both the student and the recipient of the service.

To ensure that all of our BSW students received exposure to older adults and acquired competencies in aging knowledge and skills, we required the service-learning component in conjunction with the macro social work practice course. We were concerned that those students who were not interested in aging, or who had negative views about work with aging, would not participate voluntarily. Based on a written questionnaire we did prior to infusing the curriculum with gerontological content, we knew that nearly 30% of the responding BSW students indicated negative views toward working with older adults.

For several reasons, we intentionally chose a macro social work practice class for these service-learning projects. First, when students enter our program, a typical response is that they want to work with individuals, without recognizing that the agency and community in which the service is provided are critical to meeting individual needs. Although this is primarily a growth and developmental process in learning about social work practice, we believed we could teach more effectively about macro social work practice by having students apply course content and knowledge in a real-life setting. As noted by Netting, Kettner, and McMurtry (2004), “to engage in macro practice, the social worker must understand not only the problem . . . and the population . . . but also the arena (community or organization) within which the problem occurs. Understanding communities and organizations . . . is a critical precursor to successful macro-level intervention” (p. 9). Second, having students learn about aging directly in an organization that provided services to older adults seemed to be an excellent means to help students comprehend one of the purposes of the social work profession: “to enhance the social functioning and interactions of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities by involving them in accomplishing goals, developing resources, and preventing and alleviating distress” (CSWE, 2003, p. 31). Third, as these service-learning activities were more agency-focused than client-focused, we believed they would be especially helpful in exposing those students most resistant to work with older adults to the field. Rather than working one-on-one with older adults, students worked in groups, becoming acclimated to an agency that served older adults. Finally, we believed service-learning in a macro social work practice class lent itself more easily to students working in a group format, as agencies most likely would use teams of students to complete their projects. Group learning in settings with
older adults has been a positive factor in later recruiting students to geriatric social work, in building an expanded learning process as students learn from each other, and in creating a sense of belonging and emotional support among students (Lawrence et al., 2002). In addition, students working in teams may be less nervous about going into an unknown facility (Brown & Roodin, 2001).

**THE SERVICE-LEARNING DESIGN PROCESS**

Using Polvika’s Conceptual Model for Community Interagency Collaboration (Polvika, 1995) as a guide, we began our process of developing service-learning partnerships. Polvika indicates that there are “pre-partnership conditions” that influence the collaboration, including (1) environmental factors—political, demographic, social, and economic; (2) situational factors—awareness, resource dependency, domain similarity, and consensus; and (3) task characteristics—scope, complexity, and uncertainty. Our community partners included an adult day care center and a continuing care retirement facility. Environmental and situational factors aided these collaborations, as these facilities are sponsored by the Sisters of Charity, as is the College of Mount St. Joseph. Our college has a unique opportunity to partner in educating students about aging issues simply by being located within a geographic complex that includes both of these community organizations. Governance issues, not-for-profit status, related missions, and organizational values are similar concerns for each of us.

Once the agreement was reached to allow service-learning opportunities at both of these organizations, we needed to consider the scope and complexity of tasks available for students. Timing of needs is critical (Foss et al., 2003); project activities are intended to meet both the learning objectives of the class as well as a real, unmet need of the agencies. Without an appropriate need, these assignments could not occur.

To determine whether appropriate tasks for students were available, we made numerous phone calls and held several meetings with each agency representative (the adult day care center director and the continuing care retirement center director of outreach services). Each agency clearly indicated specific needs they had: the adult day care center lacked a community outreach plan to inform the public of its services and of its new location, and the continuing care retirement center lacked an assessment of its wellness programming. Limited resources
prevented paying outside consultants for these services, and both facilities needed numerous individuals to work on these tasks.

The design process was carefully planned. The students’ tasks were delineated in minute detail, after numerous revisions involving both faculty and agency staff. We gave considerable attention to course goals and objectives and how they related to agency goals and objectives. Expectations—for agency staff, the course instructor, and the students—were outlined and focused on the following:

- Thirty hours to be spent by each student over the course of the semester
- Availability of staff to meet with students when needed
- Written guidelines on service-learning requirements of the College of Mount St. Joseph to be provided to each agency
- Agency staff to sign service-learning hours log and service-learning agreement for each participating student
- Agency staff to provide student orientation to the agencies
- Communication about these service-learning projects by agency representatives to their staff
- Course content related to projects (in particular, program evaluation and program planning processes)
- Professionalism and ethical behavior of students in the agencies, and, in turn, the same for agency staff
- Faculty availability to discuss any issues or concerns that might arise
- Faculty attendance at student orientation sessions
- Provision of students’ final projects to the agencies by course instructor, upon course completion and grade submission
- Evaluation of the project by agency representatives, faculty, and students.

Cotton and Stanton (1990) found that successful service-learning experiences involved careful planning, orientation, training, supervision, and evaluation. Our design process encompassed all of these components.

**THE SERVICE-LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

The College of Mount St. Joseph uses the Plus One Credit Option Program as its main model of service-learning. This model adds a free,
one-hour credit to the course in which service-learning is offered. This extra credit is Pass/Fail, is classified as a general elective, and is documented as service-learning on the student transcript. The college service-learning coordinator provides the orientation training sessions for the program. Faculty supply input for an initial learning contract, which spells out the individual goals, student expectations, and evaluation criteria.

Reflection is a core component of the service-learning program and includes a group-guided reflection, led by the service-learning coordinator, held for all students in various service projects to allow for cross-education among the various service experiences. Additionally, an in-class reflection to share individual insights with all class members is held by the service-learning coordinator and the course instructor. Students also meet with the course instructor to examine the students’ reactions to their service in relationship to their initial learning objectives. The final component of the reflection process entails a journal of the learning experiences submitted to the course instructor at the end of the 30 hours of service.

The initial mandated service-learning out-of-classroom activity involved assessing the extent to which overall programming in the continuing care retirement community incorporated total “wellness.” Prior to the start of the course, we submitted an application to the College’s Institutional Review Board, as the assessment process entailed a form of observation research. Once the application was accepted, the first class was held at the care facility. Demographics of the 11 participating students were as follows: 10 females, one male; three traditional age, eight nontraditional age; and, eight Caucasians, three African Americans. The directors of outreach services and pastoral care gave the students a tour of the facility, explaining the services provided, and discussing how well their programs met the six dimensions of wellness—emotional, intellectual, physical, spiritual, social, and vocational (Montague, 2001). Using these dimensions to evaluate the wellness activities in place, the assessment would provide a baseline of information to the retirement facility to determine where, if any, gaps in wellness programming existed.

Students, working in teams of two or three, were to observe a minimum of six activities involving residents in Independent Living, Assisted Living, Memory-Impaired units, and nursing care units. Each team was required to observe one meal time, one spiritual activity, and one support group, but could select the remaining three activities. Students were to use the Montague Assessment Form for Wellness Programming to evaluate whether and how those activities reflected the
six dimensions of wellness. Each student was provided a calendar of activities from which she/he could select an activity to observe.

Staff and residents were informed that social work students from the College of Mount St. Joseph would be observing regularly scheduled events for a program assessment. Students were instructed to wear name badges while in the facility. No resident or staff member was recruited to participate in activities observed by the students.

In addition to the wellness program assessment form, students were asked to write responses to the following questions after each observation period:

- What does the student perceive as the benefit of the activity to the residents?
- Does the student perceive cooperation among departments or staff members during the activity?
- Does the student perceive cooperation among residents during the activity?
- Does the attitude of the staff to both the residents and one another reflect energy, respect, enthusiasm, compassion, and interest?
- What does the student see in the environment? Is the room welcoming, comfortable, etc.?
- What is the quality of the interaction between staff and residents?

Students were instructed in the use of the Montague Wellness programming needs assessment form and these questions before the observations began. The comments to these subjective questions were written in a summary report, which students completed over the course of a semester. Each team’s final report, which included student recommendations for programming, staff relations, and so on, was typed and put into a binder for the facility and a copy was given to the course instructor for evaluation. Criteria for grading this assignment focused on the depth of analysis and the integration of social work practice methods and theory in relationship to assessment and intervention at the organizational level. The directors of outreach services and pastoral care presented the findings at a staff meeting. For the instructor, students wrote a reflection of their experiences in a retirement facility with older adults.

During the following semester of the macro social work practice class, we mandated another service-learning out-of-class project. Of the 16 students who completed this project, all were female; nine were traditional age while seven were nontraditional age; and 10 were Caucasian while six were African American. This assignment involved students
developing a community outreach plan for an adult day care program. Students worked in teams of four or less and were assigned to analyze specific components of the day care center’s outreach strategies. This overall analysis included answering the following questions:

- To whom does the day care market?
- Who are the day care’s customers, clients, and consumers?
- Who are potential financial donors?
- Who are the volunteers? How are volunteers recruited?
- Who are the board members, and how are they recruited?
- Who have provided referral services? Who could be referrals?
- Who are the significant others involved in the lives of the customers, clients, and consumers?
- What types of employee positions are needed to do the work of the day care? How many employees are on staff?
- Who is the target population for the day care? How do the outreach strategies relate to this target population?

Students also were instructed to interview the adult day care program’s social worker regarding her community outreach tasks and the strategies she uses. Likewise, students were asked to prepare a comparative study of local adult day care programs, an outreach/referral database of current and potential contacts, and a promotional plan for the adult day care program. Each team was required to collect or prepare an organizational chart of the day care, noting how the organizational structure affects outreach strategies. Additionally, each team was required to give a PowerPoint presentation about the day care program’s services to a local community group. Finally, each team was required to do one of the following: (1) write an article about some special service or event occurring at the day care and attempt to have it published in a local newspaper. The article must be reviewed and approved by the day care director before submission to the newspaper; (2) prepare a public service announcement about the day care and have this placed on a radio station; or (3) write an article on the day care’s service, take pictures, and have these placed on the College’s Social Work and Aging Website (http://inside.msj.edu/departments/academic/behs/swk/gsw/index.asp).

Each team prepared a written report of these activities, submitting it to the day care program director and the course instructor. Consequently, the program director was able to obtain multiple marketing strategies and information as she received a report from each group. Upon course completion, students submitted to the instructor a written
reflection regarding this project and work with an agency serving older adults. Each team member also submitted the individual work she/he had completed for the group project, and each team submitted a listing of who was responsible for each task.

**DISCUSSION**

In terms of Polvika’s Conceptual Model for Community Interagency Collaboration (1995), our out-of-class projects for students within a service-learning context resulted in successful community partnerships. Polvika indicated that the outcomes of a successful partnership were designated by the following: (1) degree of success of program as demonstrated through organizational structures, services, and benefits; (2) degree of responsiveness by partners to needed program changes; and (3) degree of satisfaction by participating organizations.

The organizational structure for continuing service-learning projects between the social work program and these two community agencies is in place. While having a college-wide institutionalized service-learning program facilitated this process, the social work faculty now has a collaborative relationship with agency representatives to continue this partnership with future out-of-class assignments. Additionally, both the students and the agencies reported how the service helped them. Students, in particular, focused on how the service helped them learn more, as noted by the following comments:

- “Of the five classes I am taking, [this class] is in the top two in terms of how much I have learned.”
- “I was afraid to go to a nursing home. My parents and grandparents are healthy. Seeing people in wheelchairs and slumped over was scary. I had to be made to do this for a class—I would never have gone there for any other reason. Being in a group helped tremendously—I really don’t know if I would have gone by myself. I have learned so much by going there. I’ve made friends with residents. I’ve even signed up to be a volunteer now at the nursing home!”

In both of these service-learning assignments, the agencies reported how they benefited from the service provided by the students. The continuing care retirement community presented student assessments at the staff meeting on program evaluation. The adult day care center acknowledged the promotions completed for it (i.e., public service
announcements and a newspaper article) in addition to a database being created for use in its outreach plan. Just as the students benefited from providing the service and applying course content, the agencies benefited from receiving the service.

Polvika’s second criterion for a successful partnership outcome, degree of responsiveness by partners to needed program changes, was not applicable in these projects. However, now that the relationships are developed and have been successful, and owing to the careful planning process between faculty and community agency representatives, we believe that both the social work program and these two agencies would be responsive to change that would impact projects.

Finally, Polvika regards the degree of satisfaction of participating organizations as an indicator of a successful outcome of community partnerships. For the College of Mount St. Joseph, both students and faculty represent the organization. In these classes, not one student complained about the actual service-learning activities. In fact, written statements on the course evaluations included comments such as the following:

- “I liked that we linked the course to an agency—I liked doing the service at [the continuing care retirement facility].”
- “The group project [service-learning at an adult day care center] was fun and challenging.”

One limitation of this project was that students complained that some students in their group were not contributing as much to the overall project as others. A group grade was given for each project, and students were concerned that those who had not participated equally would reap the benefits from those who had contributed much. All students provided the required 30 hours of service, but some were limited in what they provided to the final group project. We tried to rectify this limitation of the project by two processes: (1) by having students submit in report form all specific tasks they completed toward the final project for the agency and (2) having students evaluate each others’ work for the group project assignment. All of these data were used toward computing the final individual grades for the course.

Another limitation of this type of service-learning project was that the design stage required much time from faculty. This could be a deterrent for faculty carrying full teaching loads or for those having new course preparations to implement. However, once the classes and the out-of-class assignments began, the time was not excessive. Class lectures took on a new format, as students were bringing real-life situations
to the discussion, something not typically found with our BSW students in a macro social work practice class. The service-learning projects allowed the faculty to see how students applied course content in actual situations. Most important, we were able to infuse gerontological content throughout the course, as both of the service-learning settings were agencies that served older adults.

The adult day care center and the continuing care retirement community reported strong satisfaction with our venture. Each agency asked for additional service-learning projects, with a focus on macro or micro social work practice.

Our community partnership was successful in developing effective out-of-class learning assignments for our students. Students spent 30 hours immersed in an environment that provides service to older adults. Using a macro practice conceptual framework (Netting, Kettner, & McMurtry, 2004), these BSW students learned about aging in several ways. By working with a continuing care retirement community to assess wellness programming and an adult day care center to prepare a community outreach plan, students learned about memory loss and reduced functioning in activities of daily living (problem) of older adults (population). By serving directly in these organizations, students learned about the arena (the agency, the community) in which these problems of older adults were addressed.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

In this Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work Education project, we revised our curriculum so that aging content permeated the courses and overall learning experiences. To prepare our BSW students for the realities of social work, we mandated service-learning exercises not only to expose all of our majors to social work with older adults, but also to offer real-life settings to apply classroom knowledge.

Developing these real-life learning opportunities requires a substantial commitment on the part of social workers in the field. They must be willing to work with students, faculty, and clients to develop and implement these service-learning assignments. Thus, faculty has to work proactively with community social workers to develop these projects. Networking and community involvement on the part of the faculty have helped us offer a mixture of age-enriched learning experiences to our students.
It appears that continuance of well-planned, out-of-class service-learning projects will benefit students, community agencies, and faculty. Hence, increased community partnerships, with agency staff serving as co-educators in class projects—not solely field placements sites—seems to be an effective means to enhance pedagogical approaches to infusing gerontology content throughout the curriculum. We believe with carefully planned and coordinated assignments, the outcome can be a win-win situation for all parties.

REFERENCES


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