SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS IN AN UNDERGRADUATE GERONTOLOGY COURSE: A SIX-STAGE MODEL AND APPLICATION

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Service-learning opportunities are prominent on many college campuses. The process of designing and implementing service-learning experiences, especially for students of gerontology, however, has rarely been addressed. The current article briefly reviews the background and utility of service-learning in gerontology courses, describes our service-learning project, outlines a general six-stage model for developing service-learning projects in gerontology courses, and describes our process of integrating the service-learning project into an introductory gerontology course. Finally, we demonstrate that in conjunction with the promotion of evaluative practices, service-learning in the gerontology classroom presents a promising practice for creating healthier communities.

Opportunities for developing partnerships between communities and academic programs in colleges and universities abound. Unfortunately, most student learning occurs in the classroom and does not typically involve guided experience in the field. College courses may be designed to incorporate service-learning projects that mutually benefit multiple stakeholders in the academic, professional, and community environment. Through service-learning students are able to work with a professional agency within their future field, take on a professional role, develop new research skills and experience, and

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gain practice in teamwork and collaboration. In addition, the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in service-learning creates stronger ties between colleges and universities and their local communities by providing much needed services that are otherwise unavailable. Examples of possibilities for service-learning include conducting needs assessments, developing and presenting educational workshops, delivering services, or even just visiting with service recipients (McCrea, 2004).

BACKGROUND AND UTILITY OF SERVICE-LEARNING IN GERONTOLOGY COURSES

Service-learning has been found to bridge academic learning with real-world experience (Shapiro, 2003). Students take what they learn in the classroom and apply their newly acquired knowledge through community service, meeting both community service needs as well as advancing their own academic growth. Service-learning draws on John Dewey’s philosophy of education in that it “addresses the division of practical and intellectual activities as a feature of the larger philosophy of dualism” (Shapiro, 2002, p. 26). Along the continuum of service-learning, from volunteering to interning, there are five common elements: the service meets a community need, learning is integrated into course objectives, students reflect on their service experience, service recipients and students benefit from the reciprocal relationship, and the experience helps prepare students for active and responsible community involvement (McCrea, 2004).

According to the Commission on National and Community Service, service-learning activities have four components that contribute to their success: (a) learning and development through active participation, (b) integration of field application into the student’s academic curriculum and provision of structured time for reflection, (c) opportunity to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations, and (d) extension of student learning beyond the classroom (Waterman, 1997). Allowing students to reflect on and integrate course material through participation in a service-learning project bridges the gap between academic institutions and the community and further enhances the quality of the educational experience. At the same time it supports the community in which the student lives. The goals of incorporating service-learning into the gerontology classroom, thus, surround the development of partnerships in the education and training of those who provide services to older adults. These partnerships foster interactions in which older adults and students can learn from each other through the integration of community service activities and academic curricula (Covan, 2001).
As an interdisciplinary science, gerontology is the perfect context in which to apply service-learning. As much of the work in the field requires working in groups across widely dispersed services for older adults, interdisciplinary teams are often required to work across agencies and organizations. Given the good fit of service-learning and gerontology, a particular opportunity exists to link practices of community service to lessons in aging research.

Participation in intergenerational service-learning in gerontology has been found to achieve the following: (a) significantly increase students’ understanding of course concepts (Bliezner & Artale, 2001); (b) more successfully dispel myths about aging (Bliezner & Artale, 2001); (c) aid in overcoming negative stereotypes and increasing positive perceptions of older adults (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Dorfman et al., 2002); (d) increase feelings of pride and self-worth for individuals providing service to older adults in their community (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Dorfman et al., 2002); (e) bring awareness, understanding, and respect of both the positive and negative realities of older adults (Brown & Roodin, 2001; Dorfman et al., 2002); and (f) influence career paths to incorporate working with older adults in the community (Dorfman et al., 2002). In addition to these observations of shifts in students’ attitudes and awareness, there are often reciprocal benefits for older adults. Older adults have been found to benefit from increased self-esteem and reduced social isolation in response to recognition of their worth in contributing to student learning. They also benefit from the increased opportunity to network and learn with other older adults in the community (Dorfman et al., 2002).

The many benefits of service-learning have been widely recognized throughout academia and, thus, service-learning activities have become a prominent feature of many college campuses. Nevertheless, the process of designing and implementing service-learning experiences in partnership with local community collaborators, especially for students of gerontology, has not usually been addressed. Over the course of a project’s development and delivery there are several factors to consider in designing and implementing service-learning in any introductory diversity course. Here, we present our model for designing and implementing community responsive service-learning through a six-stage process. The following are the goals of the current article: first, to briefly review the background and utility of service-learning in a gerontology course; second, to describe our service-learning project; third, to outline a general six-stage model for developing service-learning projects in gerontology courses; fourth, to describe our process of integrating the service-learning
project into an introductory gerontology course; and lastly, to
demonstrate that in conjunction with the promotion of evaluative
practices, service-learning in the gerontology classroom presents a
promising practice for creating healthier communities.

THE PROJECT

The Service Request

The course instructor (JAS) was first contacted by the director of the
county’s Senior Law Project for help in answering questions he had
regarding legal assistance for older adults in the community. The
following questions were included:

- What legal issues are most relevant to older adults in the
  community?
- Is the Law Project adequately serving the community?
- What legal resources are older community members aware of?

The director’s goal was to survey older adults in the community
about these questions. Due to the broad and global nature of the ques-
tions and the scope of such a project, however, it was agreed that it
would be reasonable for the students to complete a series of focus
groups during the semester. The focus groups would be followed by
an oral presentation and written report of the results that would pro-
vide the basis for developing a survey to be administered at a later date.

The Course and the Students

The course in which the service-learning project was incorporated
was an introductory gerontology course. Fourteen students (9 female,
5 male) were enrolled in the course. Students were university sopho-
mores, juniors, and seniors, and they ranged in age from traditional-
age students in their late teens and 20s to returning students in their
40s and 50s. Three students who were not able to participate in the
focus groups were given an alternative assignment related to the pro-
ject. The first author (JLKA) served as the teaching assistant for the
course and offered technical assistance in the course planning and
training for the service-learning project. With three years experience
as a local evaluator for program grants throughout the area, she
organized and developed the service-learning schedule and necessary
training. Two additional coauthors (SGH, KDP) also participated
in the project as focus group moderators and mentors to the undergraduates.

**A SIX-STAGE MODEL FOR DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING SERVICE-LEARNING**

Building on the work of Silverstein et al. (2001) who present a model of the process of integrating action research into a course’s curriculum, we present a process model for incorporating service-learning into a course. The following are the six stages of our model: (a) establishing community collaboration, (b) partnering in the classroom, (c) student training, (d) delivering the service module, (e) returning to the classroom, and (f) reporting to stakeholders. These six stages, in conjunction with a general course timeline, are illustrated in Figure 1.

The first of these stages, establishing community collaboration, may take place either prior to course commencement or at the start of the semester with the undergraduates’ participation. The community collaboration stage consists of locating service needs in the local community, identifying key stakeholders (e.g., students, older adults, agencies), and mapping and fitting available course resources (e.g., time, course relevance, skill base, and training availability) to appropriate community projects. This stage encompasses the integration of community needs and research methods into a packaged project with an identified service population and established protocol.

In the second stage of development, partnering in the classroom, it is important that the lessons in the course curriculum prepare the students for their learning experiences. Therefore, it is key that students understand the basics of the methods and procedures that will be used in the project as well as relevant social issues (e.g., demographic indicators of social status and related stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination). Finally, it is important to invite representatives from identified key stakeholders into the classroom to present perspectives to the entire service-learning team. Once students have become familiar with the basics of the service population and the project at hand, training (Stage 3) may begin.

In Stage 3, student training, the design of the project is introduced to the students, roles are established, and participants are trained in the specific methods for the project. In addition, practice sessions using evaluative practices of interpretation and reflection, as well as visualization and prediction, are incorporated into the class activities and discussions.
In Stage 4, delivering the service module, implementation takes place in the community. In this stage the major task lies in record keeping and implementation tracking. Often, last minute adjustments must be made to schedules as multiple partners come together in a collaborative effort. Additionally, in order to apply the principles of service-learning throughout the course of the project, regular debriefing should take place among project participants in which
students share and reflect on their observations. Stage 5, returning to the classroom, is for interpreting and reflecting on the experience. Once the project has been carried out, it is important to bring all key information back to the entire group for discussion. Students should participate in group discussions and present their overall observations of changed perceptions and expanded information base to the entire class.

Lastly, in Stage 6, reporting to stakeholders, a decision must be made about the reporting format. Reporting might include anything from an open-house discussion in the classroom with the key stakeholders, to a formal report back to key stakeholders, or any combination thereof. The reporting procedure should be decided in partnership with all key stakeholders for maximum satisfaction with the service-learning outcome.

While most stages occur only once, they can occur in iterations throughout the course. For example, training and implementation (Stages 3 and 4) occur in conjunction with the timeline for appropriate methodology; however, interpretation and reflection (Stage 5) also occur after each iteration of these stages of training and implementation.

**APPLYING THE SIX-STAGE MODEL IN A GERONTOLOGY CLASSROOM**

We applied our six-stage model as a conceptual framework for developing and organizing a service-learning project for an introductory course in gerontology. The stages and accompanying steps of our model are outlined in Table 1.

**Stage 1: Establishing Community Collaboration**

Our opportunity involved collaboration with a community organization as a response to a request for service. Thus, much of the project’s scope of work was developed prior to the students’ enrollment in the course. In many cases, community collaboration, including possible collaboration with professional agencies such as a state’s Division for Aging Services, may be a student responsibility. In such instances, teams of students may seek out separate service-learning projects and play an active role in identifying key stakeholders and service needs in the community (for tips on how to pursue partners in your community, see McCrea, 2004). There are costs and benefits to each of these approaches. Specifically, in this major planning stage, students
who play a more active role in the community collaboration stage may come into the project more intrinsically motivated because of the personal ownership of the project goals that they experience; students who are brought into an already packaged project need to buy-in and adapt to a partially existing plan. At the same time, on their own, students may be less likely to have access to, or awareness of, potential training opportunities and other resources that might benefit them in their efforts. In either case, it is important that all project planning be a coordinated effort. In that way the projects and teams can each benefit from the strengths made available through collaboration among diverse sectors of the community. As we approached the task of designing and implementing a service-learning project for this gerontology course, we faced a common initial challenge. Specifically, we had to fit course goals for students and a semester timeline to the initial objectives for the community project. We did this by inventorying our resources and timelines to map out the project.

Resource Mapping
To develop a scope of work that would work with the course, we had to map out our resource base. That is, before planning what we could

**Table 1. Steps of the six-stage model for service-learning**

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<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Community needs matching</th>
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<td>1 Community collaboration</td>
<td>Resource mapping</td>
<td>Key stakeholder identification</td>
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<td>2 Partnering in the classroom</td>
<td>Diversity awareness &amp; education</td>
<td>Student interest development</td>
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<td>3 Student training</td>
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<td>Classroom invitation &amp; presentation</td>
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reasonably commit to, we established what resources were available for the project. The following were included in our resources:

- Contacts available through the local Senior Law Project and a Senior Center.
- Undergraduate students with some exposure to research methods.
- Graduate assistants.
- Experience in survey design, and focus group research.
- A good fit between the focus group activities and the course goals and calendar.

Given the resource base, it was decided that conducting focus groups would be a good service-learning activity to assist the Senior Law Project in its survey development and would fit nicely with the course goals and calendar.

**Key Stakeholder Identification**

It was determined that both older adults in the community and existing community service providers for older adults would be recruited to participate in focus groups. Older adults were recruited via advertisement and word-of-mouth at a local senior center. The Senior Law Project compiled a list of community service providers who were recruited by the coauthors via telephone.

**Matching Community Needs**

A series of general questions for the focus groups were developed by the authors and the Director of the Senior Law Project. The intent was to keep the discussion focused, but allow for open expression of ideas and concerns about broader questions. The following focus group questions were included:

- What makes a problem a legal problem?
- What are problems for which legal services may be provided to seniors?
- Of the problems named above, which are the five most important ones to resolve?
- What resources do you know of that might provide these legal services?
- Where would you look to find out about legal services that are available?

**Stage 2: Partnering in the Classroom**

Understanding the basics of gerontological research (e.g., cohort effects, age effects, time/period effects) as well as general social
research (e.g., demographic indicators of social status and related stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination) was key to our project’s success. While we were aware that the students had had some previous exposure to research methodology, the interdisciplinary nature of the course also posed some challenges in bringing students “onto the same page.” By focusing on particular methodology training pieces, running mock events, and having consistent training time in the classroom (four 1-hour training modules), students were able to gain practical first-hand experience as both trainees and participants before entering the service field.

Diversity Awareness and Education
Our gerontology course is traditionally set up to raise awareness and educate students on the diverse experiences of aging. In addition to covering common topics in gerontology (e.g., economic, social, and policy issues in aging), it was necessary to have students reflect on their own experience, or lack of exposure to such issues. This was important so that students could recognize resource barriers and experiences of social constraints that could be revealed in the focus groups.

Developing Student Interest
It was also necessary to gain students’ interest and investment in the service project as an extension of what they were learning in the course. In order to link classroom lessons to the basics of the service-learning project, we integrated several points of reflection and critical thinking into the activities and discussions of course assignments. Examples of these activities included debates over controversial issues, class discussions of hot topics raised in the text, and reviews of articles in the local senior newspaper.

In addition, the Director of the Senior Law Project was invited to come to class and give an overview to the students of the existing services. The specific concerns of the Senior Law Project were discussed during an informal lecture. Through these activities students had the opportunity to further understand the overall structure and function of the Law Project and become more familiar with the needs of the older adults being served.

Stage 3: Student Training

Research Design
Much of our project was set in motion prior to the start of the semester. In order for the undergraduates to understand the project, it was necessary for them to learn of the context in which the focus
groups would play a part. That is, students needed to be instructed on the role of focus groups in survey development. Thus, lessons in research design and methodology were integrated into the course for the purpose of facilitating the service-learning project.

**Methods Training**
In addition to the research design training, the students also received some basic training in moderating a focus group and taking good notes. Several new topics were added to the course to prepare the students to have a successful experience in their service-learning project. In all, four training modules were added to the course that were specific to skill development for the service-learning project. The first two modules covered the role of focus groups in survey design and focus group basics, and they were presented through readings and lectures (Fern, 2001; Fowler, 1995). The authors presented the remaining training modules that focused on mock focus groups and note-taking and thematic analysis.

**Visualization and Prediction**
It was also important that students learn to identify their own assumptions and reflect upon what they might learn when participating in the project. Mock focus groups required students to participate in visualizing and predicting the responses of participants in the focus groups. Specifically, based on what they had learned from the course and their own experiences in the community, students participated in mock focus groups, imagining their role as older adults and giving hypothetical responses.

**Service-Learning Pilot and Reflection**
In addition to participating in the mock focus groups, students gained practice in note-taking during the mock groups and discussed note-taking strategies and challenges. After this practice session, we reviewed the basics of focus group note-taking and made slight changes to the protocol for the focus groups based on students’ feedback in the mock focus groups.

**Stage 4: Delivering the Service Module**
Students participated outside of the classroom in one of five 1-hour focus groups—either with four groups of 8–16 senior citizens, or a group of service providers from the community. Each focus group was facilitated by one of the authors and two or three of the undergraduates: an undergraduate took notes on paper and another took notes on poster boards so that participants could track and reflect
upon their comments. In an effort to facilitate communications, focus group questions were presented in both verbal and written (large font) format by the facilitators.

The Director of the Senior Law Project provided a $10 stipend to each of the seniors who participated in the focus groups in appreciation for taking their time to take part in the study.

Stage 5: Returning to the Classroom

Reflection is one of the key ingredients to successful service-learning. Students’ reflections on their changing perceptions and learned experience, while emphasized throughout the previous stages, are the sole activity of Stage 5. At the same time, Stage 5 was an opportunity for students to participate in interpreting the data they collected and in generating and organizing feedback for the report to the other key stakeholders (i.e., director of the Senior Law Project, service providers, and older adults in the community). To do this, students would need to understand the basics of thematic coding of qualitative data. Thus, at this point in our process we introduced the final training module on thematic coding. In this module students learned to delineate different themes from the focus group responses through small group and class discussion and presentation of observations (two additional hours of classroom time).

Stage 6: Reporting to Stakeholders

Upon completing the thematic coding, the director of the Senior Law Project was invited back to the class where he was presented with the notes and coding summary that were developed by the class. The presentation was followed by an active discussion in which students offered suggestions emerging from the thematic analysis for more senior networking activities as well as specific questions to include in the future survey. After the close of the course, the authors prepared a summary report for the director of the Senior Law Project.

SERVICE-LEARNING AS A PROMISING PRACTICE

The interaction of the students with the community’s Senior Law Project in this service-learning project was beneficial for all stakeholders. The students were able to work with a professional agency within the field of aging and take on a role of professionalism in the process. Through this role, students developed new research skills and experience relevant to gerontology. In addition, students gained
exposure to evaluative practices of interpretation and reflection as well as practice in teamwork and collaboration—invaluable in the field of gerontology.

For the older adults, the focus group event itself revealed a sense of camaraderie and mutual support. Without the focus group they may not have had the opportunity to share the types of ideas and experiences that were presented and discussed. This project provided an environment in which older adults could collaborate with peers to expand and strengthen their social networks, which should overwhelmingly yield positive consequences both personally and for those in their social network. Based on observations in this project, participating in focus groups produces immediate benefits to seniors who have an opportunity to learn from each other.

The Senior Law Project was also able to benefit in multiple ways. First, and most directly, the Senior Law Project used the local resource of students as researchers. In addition, the director of the Senior Law Project was able to become more familiar with the methods and studies undertaken by gerontology students. Third, there was a great benefit in the receipt of immediate feedback based upon common responses. That is, many of the older adults expressed excitement over the opportunity to participate in the focus group, their hopes of “learning something” from the other participants, and a desire for more networking opportunities for information exchange. Students directed attention to these desires of older adults in their suggestions for future programming. Specifically, we recommended more regular question-answer and networking meetings be held in which older adults may learn about a specific legal issue as well as have an opportunity to get a few of their questions answered by a lawyer from the Senior Law Project. We also recommended the provision of separate social networking opportunities advertised as a time and place for older adults to educate each other about their different experiences with common legal matters.

We have illustrated the success of this six-stage model in incorporating the four basic components of service-learning (Waterman, 1997). We did this with an example of a service-learning project based on the legal issues of older adults for an introductory undergraduate course in gerontology. A service-learning project that focused on older adults allowed both the gerontology students and the older adults to learn from each other (Covan, 2001). The students and the adults were also able to apply acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations that extend beyond student learning beyond the classroom (Waterman, 1997). This was exemplified by an undergraduate student who had met an elderly woman facing some legal issues over housing that were going to result in her being evicted from her residence. Fortunately, he
was able to refer her to the Senior Law Project, which resulted in resolution of the legal issues and no eviction. Further, the dualism between practical and intellectual activities as described by John Dewey (Shapiro, 2002) is reduced by this service-learning project. Specifically, students demonstrated their learning and development through active participation as well as integration of field application into the classroom through structured reflection time (Waterman, 1997). Many students shared their observations of how the information they learned about potential legal problems—and how a senior adult may view a legal problem—gave them insights into how they might help their older family members and their friends. The students’ insights enhanced their ability to be active and responsible community members as suggested by McCrea (2004).

The extent to which similar experiences have continued among the participants is not known. A follow-up with the undergraduates and older adults who participated is recommended to see what other lasting impacts the project has made on the participants. For instance, obtaining information regarding possible increases in self-esteem of both the students and the older adults (e.g., Dorfman et al., 2002), changes in attitudes towards older adults and aging, and, awareness of the realities of aging (e.g., Brown & Roodin, 2001) may further exemplify the benefits of a service-learning project. Clearly, the possibilities for using this service-learning model are manifold and hold great promise for both the academy and the community at large.

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