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Learning From Each Other, Serving Together

Abstract

At Trinity Christian College we believe that incorporating service and scholarship into teaching is congruent with the transformational nature of Trinity's mission. An Illinois Campus Compact funded service-learning project broadened Trinity students' understanding of service-learning pedagogy as they planned, participated in and assisted students with disabilities in service-learning experiences. College students, high school teachers and high school students with disabilities had the opportunity to work, learn, and serve together.

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Patricia L. Powell

Summary: At Trinity Christian College we believe that incorporating service and scholarship into teaching is congruent with the transformational nature of Trinity's mission. An Illinois Campus Compact funded service-learning project broadened Trinity students' understanding of service-learning pedagogy as they planned, participated in and assisted students with disabilities in service-learning experiences. College students, high school teachers and high school students with disabilities had the opportunity to work, learn, and serve together.

Dale Coye (1997) in his paper "Ernest Boyer and the New American College: Connecting the Disconnects" emphasized Boyer's (1990) idea that a college should incorporate service and scholarship into teaching. This is particularly true in Christian colleges and many, in fact, incorporate service as part of the college's mission statement. At Trinity Christian College we believe that this educational methodology is congruent with the transformational nature of Trinity's mission which states in part that "Those who teach and learn are called to be co-workers with Christ in subjecting all culture to the reign of God, and that genuine education must involve the whole person as a thinking, feeling, believing creature" (Trinity Christian College Mission, n.d.). At many colleges this expanded broad definition of scholarship and the value of connecting to the world beyond the classroom are not yet embraced. Therefore, it is important to develop teaching models that can integrate service-learning and scholarship into teaching. Moreover, these models need to be clearly and appropriately assessed for their effectiveness.

The rationale for incorporating service-learning methodology is rooted in a concern for the development of young people socially, psychologically, and intellectually, as well as in an interest in the transformation of schools and learning. As Christians, service is also rooted in the command to love and care for others as

Christ loves and cares for us. Drawing upon the work of Robert Bellah and Nel Noddings (Bellah, et al., 1985; Noddings, 1992), I contend that for students, caring is an opportunity to integrate the life of the mind with the habits of the heart. Caring as exhibited through service participation is directly or indirectly an ethical activity, a reply to the hearts call and one that answers a moral need in the world. We all, young and old, black and white, able-bodied and disabled are required to answer this call and it is here that each of us actualizes the basic need to be altruistic or caring for others as we care for ourselves. Jesus teaches us that "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, The Bible) If we do not incorporate opportunities for learning to understand ourselves and others through acts of altruism and civic participation as part of the school curriculum, we give students the impression that acts of courage, compassion, duty, and commitment are rare, and surely done by extraordinary people, people much different from them (Ruggenberg, 1993). We need to realize that the problems confronting us today, from the homeless in our streets and poverty in the Third World to ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect cannot be solved solely by technology or technical expertise. To begin to solving these problems, let alone the problems of emptiness, loneliness, and meaninglessness in our personal lives, we are required to greatly improve our institutions, especially schools. We need to understand how much of our lives are lived in and through our institutions and we need to understand how to improve those institutions if we are to lead better lives. (Bellah, et al., 1985, p. 104)

Service to "the least" of persons, as people with disabilities are often thought of, is a moral command for everyone, and all must participate in communicating new ways of expressing caring and kindness. Service must also be real, developmentally appropriate, and systematic. Four potential outcomes of service-learning pedagogy include; an enhanced and relevant

school curriculum, the promotion of students' personal development, the promotion of reflective, civic responsibility, and practical local community benefits (Kendall, 1990, Wade, 1997). Teachers have written with near-unanimity about the positive impact service participation has on students who volunteer, which include personal growth, social growth, intellectual growth, citizenship, and preparation for the world of work. (Alt, 1997, Budin, 1992-1993, Cairn, 1999, Conrad & Hedin, 1982) Service-learning aims to prepare students to be lifelong learners and participants in the world. Service, when combined with learning adds value to each and transforms both by focusing on students knowing "why" as well as "what" through engaged learning with an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills. Service also can uniquely provide youth opportunities for growth in moral, social, and civic awareness.

In 2003, the Illinois Campus Compact in partnership with the State Farm Insurance Foundation issued a call for proposals to establish five faculty fellow projects to integrate scholarship, teaching, and service with K-12 programs. The Trinity Christian College project was selected to broaden students' understanding of service-learning pedagogy by not only participating in service-learning, but by also assisting students with disabilities in service-learning experiences. Since there is no formal service-learning component in the education department at Trinity Christian College, this experience was also used as a laboratory for our education department to observe and learn about service-learning first-hand.

In this project collaborations were paramount, specifically a collaboration between Elim Christian School, a K-12 school for students with disabilities, students from Special Education 216, an Introduction to Exceptional Children course, from Trinity Christian College, community partners, and myself, the recipient of one of the Campus Compact grants. These collaborations worked to establish greater learning, support, motivation, and sustainability for the service-learning work. This project also exhibited multiple models and multiple delivery systems that offered people from a variety of educational and community institutions with varying learning objectives different ways to think about implementing service-learning activities. Finally, this research project had a clearly articulated assessment and evaluation component. This project looked

at the personal, social, and academic growth of both the college students and the high school students with disabilities.

Special Education 216 is a course enrolling 100 students annually and required for every education major. Imbedded in this course is a 30-hour teacher-aiding experience, fulfilled by spending time in a classroom with students with disabilities. During the fall, 2003 semester, the focus of this experience changed from a traditional teacher-aiding experience to a service-learning experience for some students. This was accomplished by tying their teacher aiding experience to service-learning and service-learning pedagogy with students from a high school program for students with disabilities at Elim Christian School. The Elim high school program houses 10 classes of about 100 students, ages 16-21. Sixteen of the SPED 216 students assisted the high school teachers in developing service-learning projects within their classrooms. The students' understanding of service-learning pedagogy was greatly enhanced by not only participating in service-learning, but by also assisting students with disabilities in service-learning experiences.

The project methodology centered on several research models including pre and post surveys, qualitative data gathered through student reflection journals and narrative inquiry which centered on personal interviews with both college and high school students. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience that includes collaboration between researcher and participants where the researcher enters the experience of the participants. Portraiture was used to tell the stories of the high school and college students through their own voices (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The portraitist acts as both a scientist and an artist, seeking to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of each unique experience, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, and trusting that readers will identify with the experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). How the participants feel about themselves and the work they do is the story that should be told. Service is a necessary part of the human experience, and all students should be given the opportunity to serve, reflect on that service, and then tell others about their experience.

The Elim high school students involved in this project were asked to reflect on their work by writing reflec-

tion journals, speaking into tape recorders, and/or drawing about their experiences in service-learning if they were able. Data were verified through a follow up process of confirming findings with the high school teachers and college students. Data were also gathered from the SPED 216 students, primarily through their reflection journals, which are a fundamental part of their teacher aiding experience and also through pre and post surveys.

SPED 216 students were given the option to have a more traditional teacher aiding experience or this service-learning experience. Data were collected from both groups of students in areas relating to the relevance of their teacher aiding experience to their coursework, and caring and altruistic behaviors arising from their experience, through pre and post surveys and comparison of their reflection journals. Findings are important to both teachers and administrators as they continue to pursue service-learning as pedagogy for their students.

Students who chose the service-learning option began the preparation portion of their service-learning experience by working with the teachers and high school students from Elim to determine potential community needs. These college students worked with the classes to set up their service-learning programs, assisted in practical skill enhancement related to the individual students' IEP goals in preparation for the service-learning experience, implemented the service-learning experience and assisted these classes in planning final celebratory events. The college students' reflective journals were incorporated into SPED 216 coursework through lectures, discussions, and small group work.

Thirty-two students were involved in a traditional teacher-aiding experience for the semester and sixteen students were involved in the newly developed service-learning experience. Both groups of students spent thirty hours over the course of the fifteen-week semester in classrooms working with students with disabilities. The students participating in traditional teacher-aiding were in a variety of special education settings near the college while the service-learning students were placed in high school classrooms in a school specifically for students with disabilities, Elim Christian School.

Forty-eight SPED 216 students filled out pre and post

questionnaires designed to measure general attitudes and perceptions of college students. This instrument was developed by D. Diaz-Gallegos, A. Furco, and H. Yamada from the University of California at Berkeley (1999) and was distributed the first week of classes and again, the last week of classes. Students were asked to respond to statements by circling strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. The results of this survey are being used to understand the experience and enhance the service-learning component of this class in the future.

The results of the survey were tallied and results from the two groups were compared. There were a number of interesting comparisons between both the pre and post surveys of each group and between the two groups that are worth noting. Following are highlights of some of these comparisons.

The non-service-learning group of students had four substantial differences between their pre and post surveys. There were three questions where the student's answers generally moved from agree to disagree: 1) I am concerned about local community issues, 2) Sometimes I am not as reliable as I should be, and 3) When put in charge of a project, I sometimes wonder whether I can succeed at it. Generally, student responses moved from disagree to agree on the statement; what happens to me is my own doing.

The service-learning group of students also had four substantial differences between their pre and post surveys. There were also three questions where the student's answers changed from agree to disagree: 1) The extent of my achievement is often determined by chance, 2) I think that people should find time to contribute to their community, and 3) I am not sure about what skills are necessary for my career. Student responses changed from disagree to agree on the statement; I feel I can have an impact on local social problems.

In both sets of results it must be noted that individual students self selected whether to participate in the service-learning project. Perhaps students who chose to participate in service-learning are students who are interested in community contribution and social problems and students who did not self select the service-learning project are unsure of themselves and/or the contributions they can make in service to others.

Perhaps the most interesting comparisons are between the non-service-learning and the service-learning group. On the statements, 1) I find the content in school courses intellectually stimulating, 2) I am concerned about local community issues, and 3) giving some of my income to help those in need is something I should do, the non-service-learning group's responses changed from agree to disagree while the service-learning group changed from disagree to agree. Again, we must consider the fact that students self selected involvement in the service-learning project and this may have contributed to these findings.

The most interesting and significant data were derived from college students' observation/reflection journals. There was a distinct difference between the two groups of students. While many of the students from each group spoke of learning much from and enjoying their teaching aiding experience with special needs students, several of the service-learning students also spoke at length about the positive influence that this service-learning project had on clarifying career plans and future aspirations. Service-learning participants experienced great joy in giving to others both personally and vicariously through their students as described in their journals. At least one service-learning participant actually changed her major from education to special education after this experience because she became so personally invested in her students. One service-learning participant wrote, "This semester was more than I ever expected. My initial thoughts about creating a service-learning project for a special needs classroom were filled with nervousness and difficulty. The service-learning project was a great integration for students with special needs. It taught them relationship skills with strangers and ways in which they can help people around them. It also gave them something they could be proud of. The students saw the real life application in the lessons and enjoyed doing them."

Every high school teacher involved in this project stated overwhelmingly that they would like to participate again and found the service-learning project academically enriching and civically engaging. Several teachers hoped to continue service-learning projects in their classrooms after this project ended and were actively seeking ways to fund new projects.

The Elim students that served their school and community through projects as diverse as holding a tea

for area residents of a nursing home, writing soldiers in Iraq, collecting and counting pop tops from aluminum cans to raise funds for dialysis and researching and presenting information on the federal government had only positive things to say about their experience with the Trinity students. Verbally, through pictures, and through simple written expressions, the students with disabilities that participated in this project spoke of the people they had served, the relationships they had formed with the college students they had worked along side of and the service-learning recipients and the fun experiences they enjoyed. They were eager to share photographs of their experiences, invite observers to their celebration events, and stay in touch with their college mentors, and several classrooms invited their community partners to their celebratory events.

Service, when combined with learning, gives meaning to each and transforms both. College students, high school teachers and high school students with disabilities had the opportunity to experience this truth first-hand as they worked, learned, and served together. Learning from each other, and serving together, teachers, students and preservice teachers each had the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of others.

As a State Farm Faculty Fellow representing an Illinois Campus Compact member institution, I was allowed the opportunity to develop a unique project that exhibited collaboration, employed a variety of research models, and obtained critical research findings which added to the field of service-learning in both special education and higher education. In addition to significant learning experiences for both the college and the high school students involved and service to the various community partners, there was also an increase in service-learning visibility on Trinity's campus. Presenting this project at a service learning workshop on Trinity's campus, at a Rockford College service-learning conference and at the International Service-Learning Research Conference at Clemson University served to inform other scholars.

Developing the appropriate models, finding sustainable collaborations, and assessing the results of research are challenging. The positive impact of the recognition of the pedagogical value of service learning, the institutional understanding of service-learning, the collaborations, models, and research results make the effort worthwhile. In conclusion, service-learning has

the potential to address and reinvigorate education for all students in accordance with the Greater Expectations report from the Association of American Colleges and Universities: "Quality liberal education...has the strongest impact when studies reach beyond the classroom to the larger community, asking students to apply their developing analytical skills and ethical judgment to concrete problems in the world around them, and to connect theory with the insights gained from practice" (www.greaterexpectations.org). The report concludes with keys to improving education; "collaboration and concerted action."

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