

Service Learning: The Road from the Classroom to Community-Based Macro Intervention

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ABSTRACT. An integrated service-learning-based curriculum teaches community-based social work practice by linking classroom-learning objectives to service learning experiences in the community. This integrated approach links three core curriculum courses directly to the community and social policy through service-learning projects. At the same time, it reinforces the social work commitment to social justice by fostering student advocacy, interest, and involvement in macro and social policy issues while developing macro-level practice skills and increasing civic engagement. Course content with a sample student project, implementation issues, and implications for social work education are addressed with this curriculum model.

KEYWORDS. Service learning, community practice, social work education, advocacy

Social work educators must address the needs of social work graduates who face increasingly complex problem situations that require more varied

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skill competencies to help clients in communities than those taught solely within the field practicum experience (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000). Social workers must help clients in economically, politically, racially, and ethnically polarized communities to which the workers may not have been exposed in their personal lives and field practice experience. Academicians who fail to adequately prepare students and teach them the requisite skills for changing environments contribute to social worker burnout and a sense of powerlessness (Lager & Cooke Robbins, 2004). Reisch and Jarman-Rohde (2000) strongly suggest that restructuring traditional field placement models, vertical and horizontal integration of content, and expanding opportunities for community-based learning are among the changes needed to adequately prepare social workers for professional practice today.

An integrated service-learning-based curriculum focused on the macro-practice skills needed by social workers in generalist practice can overcome the dichotomy between traditional didactic learning in the classroom and experiential community-based learning. Building upon the social work tradition and value placed upon field practicum learning (Lager & Cooke Robbins, 2004), a direct linkage of learning objectives to service-learning experiences in courses that supplement the traditional field practicum experience helps students integrate micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level skills and apply them to community-based social work practice.

The integrated model presented here directly links social work practice to research and policy, facilitates the integration of course content with relevant social justice issues in the local community, fosters student advocacy, interest, and involvement in macro and social policy issues while developing macro-level practice skills, and empowers community groups and disadvantaged populations. This article suggests issues that social work educators face in implementing such an integrated and service-learning-based curriculum model.

SERVICE LEARNING AND SOCIAL WORK FIELD PRACTICE

Service learning has been described as an integrated “credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflects on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 221).

As does a service-learning perspective, social work education has historically emphasized the importance of the hands-on field learning experience to the development of social work professionals that helps differentiate the social work profession from other professions (Marshack, 1994). Horizontal and vertical integration of social work knowledge, skill development, and practice competency results from the experiential learning that occurs during the practicum experience (Miller, Corcoran, Kavacs, Rosenblum, & Wright, 2005).

Caspi and Reid (1998) emphasize the need for a task-centered model of field instruction that has primary goals of addressing client needs and helping students to obtain social work knowledge and skills. To meet these goals during the field experience, tasks are defined with clear expectations and accountability measures, contain feedback and evaluation processes, and link class and field knowledge.

Linking learning objectives to experiential-based experiences in an agency setting forms the core of the social work field practice experience (Caspi & Reid, 1998; Fortune, Cavazos, & Lee, 2005; Miller et al., 2005). Although not traditionally labeled as such, the field practicum can be viewed as a type of service learning course because the field experience is the capstone experience that integrates the social work knowledge-base, practice skills, critical thinking, and the professional values encompassed within the code of ethics. This is especially true in relation to social workers' responsibility to advocate and promote social justice (NASW, 1999). However, the field placement focus on professional social work skill development differentiates it from the experiential learning that may occur in a service-learning course (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996).

Expanding the service-learning-based courses within the social work curriculum builds upon the traditional internship by providing students with additional exposure to real world problems experienced within communities. Jovanich (2003) identified response to community needs, content integrated to service experiences, and a sustained focus in discussions about civic engagement as the three primary criteria for a service-learning-based course. Rather than engage in solely volunteer work, students intervene in problems identified by agency partners, community groups or grassroots community engagement. Doing so provides them a direct exposure to diverse persons and client situations while giving them an opportunity to actively develop and test -problem solving, negotiation, advocacy, and social justice skills.

CURRICULUM MODEL

Within this model, three social work courses, Human Behavior in Organizations and Communities, Social Policy, and Human Diversity and Social Justice, are linked by curriculum that focuses on active involvement with real social problems within the community rather than scenario-driven role-play exercises (see Figure 1). Students are encouraged to select a social issue in which they have a personal and passionate interest that can be applied across the three courses. Specifically, using existing social problems, students learn how to conduct community assessments, use research-based interventions, conduct policy analysis and evaluation, and plan and carry out community intervention strategies. Thus, students link social problems to micro through macro levels of practice and through their macro-skill development are encouraged to view policy as practice that can be altered by their participation in democratic processes.

To vertically and horizontally integrate content, faculty collaborated to incorporate desired learning outcomes across the three courses (see Figure 2). A primary focus was for students to understand the need to view problems from a broader perspective than solely from that of the individual client. Second, students needed to learn how to assess problems from a larger systems

FIGURE 1. Curriculum model.

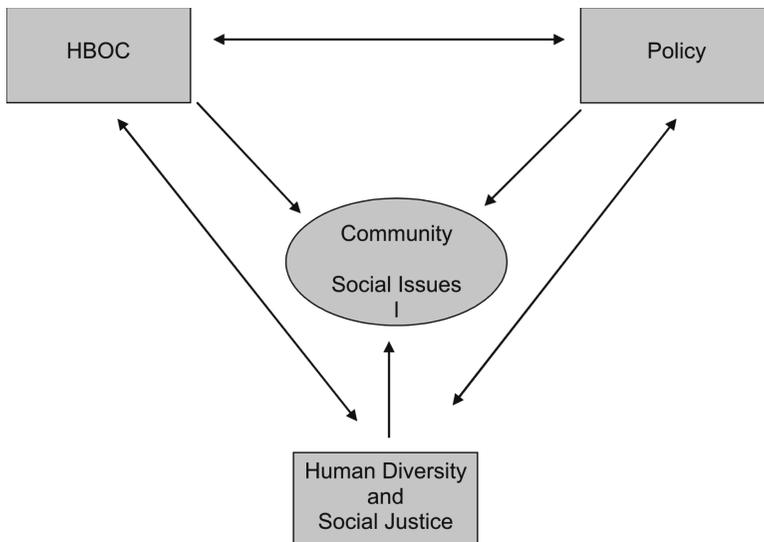
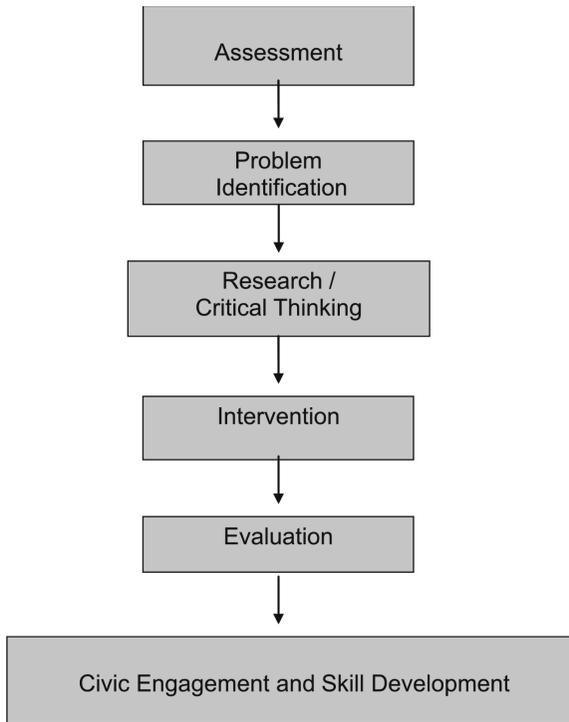


FIGURE 2. Intervention model.



perspective and that the primary skills used were similar to those used in micro-level practice. Another desired learning outcome was an understanding of power, communication, and group work as important tools for advocacy in the macro arena. Finally, students were to develop mastery of skills to gain confidence in their collective ability to bring about changes in policy and communities, and to develop skills individually so that they would continue their involvement in the community post-graduation.

Human Behavior in Organizations and Communities (HBOC)

Beginning with the foundation course in Human Behavior in Organizations and Communities (HBOC), particular attention is devoted to applying micro and mezzo skills to community assessment to prevent students from imposing solutions before a thorough community needs assessment

is completed. Within this curriculum, HBOC is traditionally the first exposure to macro-level content on assessment, but students have prior exposure to social problems and related research. Their enthusiasm and zeal to help people combined with this previous exposure leads to a tendency for students to pick a social problem and solution, then to impose it on a community regardless of need.

To combat the tendency to impose solutions without first assessing need, students are required to conduct a community assessment that forces them to consult census reports and community websites, conduct interviews with influential persons, and learn about the resources available within the community (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006). Particular attention focuses upon the social, political, and economic climate of a community and in identifying persons with power in the different arenas. During the assessment, students are encouraged to begin identifying the social problems that emerge.

Following the community assessment, students select one of the social problems they identified and then review relevant research to find applicable solutions. The overall goal is to develop a program to meet a human service need or to increase community awareness of a social issue or problem. Armed with a solution to address the identified need or issue grounded in research, the students formulate a problem statement, intervention goals, and evaluation measures, and then they begin implementation of a social action campaign.

Social Welfare Policy

The Social Welfare Policy course linkage to HBOC occurs when students select a social issue of interest or current import. Students are required to identify, track, and analyze existing or proposed federal or state legislation. Students are encouraged to choose an issue to analyze that they identified in HBOC. Selecting their community social problem helps students learn that seemingly far-removed decisions that occur at the federal and local levels regarding social policy and funding are actually *local* when implemented to solve a problem in their community. Using applied research and the policy analysis, students evaluate and make policy recommendations to present to legislators.

Unlike most traditional bachelor's-level social welfare policy courses, students learn how to research scholarly journals and navigate government websites to gather information about state and federal legislators, track bills by legislative session and by social issue, and to search for

information about state statutes. This reinforces the course content from HBOC in that students are reminded repeatedly of the direct linkage between social problem identification, the political process, research based solutions, and funding streams.

The social welfare policy course diverges into skill development when students use the information and their policy analysis to write drop papers, policy briefs, and letters to legislators. When the legislature is in session, the students take this information directly to the state capitol when they meet in small groups with the legislators in their offices. When not in session, students schedule similar meetings in legislators' local offices. Very concretely, students practice writing and public-speaking skills, learn legislative language, learn the etiquette for legislator access, and most important, get direct experience in advocating with policymakers. Students frequently report being impressed that the legislator took the time to meet with them, but more impressively, *listened* to their presentation of the issues even if it was in opposition to the legislator's publicly stated positions.

Human Diversity and Social Justice

Building upon the macro practice skills the students develop completing their community assessment and research-based solution, and the lobbying work begun in the social welfare policy course, the Human Diversity and Social Justice course (HDSJ) requires students to continue implementation of their action campaign plans. Either individually or in small groups, students connect with local social service agencies or neighborhood groups to implement their plan to improve the status of the policy issue or community problem. The work in HDSJ is designed to give students the opportunity to devote more hours over a longer period with a greater number of community activities from their action campaign plans because the activities span two semesters.

A key component of the community action campaign includes an emphasis on developing measurable objectives directly related to the identified need, ongoing revision and evaluation of the process, and outcome of the change effort. Students may engage in petition-signing efforts, lobby legislators and elected officials, hold public demonstrations, develop letter-writing or media campaigns, or partner with social service agency programs, among other tactics. The following student project illustrates the intertwined content and skill development of this curriculum model.

AIDS Awareness and Prevention Campaign

Three students partnered in the HBOC course to complete their community assessment on Fort Walton Beach, FL. The students gathered information ranging from geographic location to demographics to community livability using the model presented in class (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006). They also interviewed social workers who practice in Fort Walton Beach to determine problem issues. Following the assessment, the students determined that there was a lack of awareness regarding AIDS and its transmission. The local agency serving clients who have AIDS, Okaloosa AIDS Support and Informational Services (OASIS), provided the students information regarding the scope of their current prevention efforts and their service limitations due to funding restraints. The OASIS program had only two paid staff members at the time and relied heavily on volunteers.

In the social welfare policy course, the students then focused their research on the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency Act of 1990 (CARE Act), Public Law 101-38, and queried local legislators regarding their positions on funding AIDS programs. The lack of state-level financial support for prevention programs sponsored by OASIS were an impetus for the students' decision to implement an AIDS awareness and prevention project at the university's branch campus in Fort Walton Beach.

The students designed and implemented their project on AIDS prevention in the HDSJ course. They met regularly as a group to plan the event, delegate task assignments, assess progress, and regroup. The project was coordinated with OASIS to hand out educational materials and conduct HIV testing on campus. They met with business and community leaders to disseminate information throughout the Fort Walton Beach area. For the core of their project, the students set up information tables and had HIV testing available on campus on seven separate dates. The three students designed publicity (letters of interest to community agencies, flyers, e-mail announcements, radio ads), secured the informational materials and testing kits from OASIS, and staffed the event. Twenty-four persons were tested on the first date, 3 persons tested on the second date, 17 were tested on the third date; 2 were tested on the fourth date, no one attended the fifth date, 2 were tested on the sixth date; no one attended the seventh; and 3 attended the eighth. The students secured commitment from the university and OASIS to schedule HIV testing monthly through the end of the year. In addition, the students worked with OASIS to meet with local business owners to place flyers and condom baskets in the business locations. The flyers show the schedule of testing dates for the remainder of the year.

SERVICE LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Students who engage in community-based activities connected with the three macro-based courses receive credit for the hours they work from the university service-learning department. For example, students log hours for attending public meetings, interviewing influential stakeholders, working on the community events in their action plan, lobbying legislators, and organizing their action group. Students report from 20 to 100 community-based hours from the three courses combined. Rather than being an unfamiliar requirement, for 70 percent of students (Astin, 1996 as cited in Hinck & Brandell, 2000), community service effort at the university level simply expands upon the community service involvement during high school. To recognize the students' efforts within the community, the university records service learning hours on official transcripts (Volunteer UWF!, n.d.). Students must attain at least 20 hours in the course of the semester to get the hours documented; if students do not log the minimum 20 hours in the course of one semester, the hours roll over into the next semester and may be combined with other service learning activity hours to reach the minimum.

Most important, the students' active participation in the community, and their applied efforts to bring about change based upon course content, reinforce the difference between "volunteering" and service learning. The hands-on, real-world social work experience provides students the opportunity "to make sense of the social world in ways that do not rely on linear logic of textbooks" (Jonavich, 2003, p. 81). Students develop skills in working as part of a team, in leadership positions, in conflict resolution, and in community development while mastering macro-level social work practice. The end result is that they learn to be active participants in democracy that may lead to increased civic engagement upon graduation.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

Use of an integrated curriculum model that incorporates service learning in the community must be supported by faculty members committed to the premise behind service learning, i.e., the community becomes a laboratory for student learning. As such, faculty members must support the premise that service learning is an educational philosophy and an instructional method (Bringle, Games, Foos, Osgood & Osborne, 2000). Similarly, faculty must invest extra time and effort to become familiar

with community issues themselves (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002), and to be invested in empowering students to engage in change efforts. Extra time devoted to office hours and meetings in community settings is critical to the success of student efforts. Time constraints, combined with students who live and work in geographic locations far removed from university facilities, demand faculty availability with flexibility in task assignments and measures of student learning. Since community problems and settings are so varied, faculty must decrease their reliance upon testing and assessment measures that focus on classroom-based content to reflective assignments that demonstrate skill-based competencies (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997; Strouse, 2003). A positive outcome for social work faculty members who use a service learning-based approach is that it may reintegrate academically-focused social workers with the community and provide them with up-to-date classroom examples.

An implementation issue that may arise for some social work programs, as it does for faculty currently using this model, is the rise in non-traditional students. Students and faculty members using this model must negotiate conflicts in schedules, work and family demands, as well as class schedules when coordinating service-learning activity for a student population that is weighted more toward nontraditional students with family and work responsibilities who reside off-campus as opposed to a traditional campus-based student population.

Although a component of service, the increased demands from a service learning community-based activity are not always recognized in faculty workloads, nor do they count toward tenure and promotion (Hammond, 1994 as cited in Bringle, Hatcher, & Games, 1997). To the contrary, both faculty and the university may be more visible than before the service-learning project because students frequently identify issues that challenge existing norms and the status quo. Depending upon how well the university is positioned in partnership with the local community, increased visibility may be viewed as either a liability or something to be welcomed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Within the social work profession, using this service-learning-based curriculum model to develop an affinity for macro-level practice and community involvement may require a philosophical shift in how practice is viewed. This model presumes that macro-based practice is skill based,

therefore has a corresponding need to provide students with real-world field experience to foster skill development. Rather than be solely a volunteer experience, the service-learning project must be connected to the content and be viewed as an integral part of the course. As such, service-learning-based courses may appear to be in conflict with or a challenge to existing internship requirements, particularly in programs with a strong micro-practice focus.

In addition to macro-skill development, the service learning experience reinforces the interconnection between policy and social work practice (Influencing State Policy, 2006) and helps students make direct connections between legislation and their local community. Another important effect of incorporating macro service-learning-based curriculum is that it reconnects students with core social work values to promote social justice and engage in advocacy (NASW Code of Ethics, 1999). Similarly, providing students community-based experience expands upon strengths and competency-based models by capitalizing upon the skills students develop in traditional internships and connects them with diverse population groups with whom they may have had no prior exposure, e.g., economically disadvantaged or immigrant groups.

Students emerge from the courses presented herein with a sense that their activities and participation in the community are valued and a necessary part of a democratic society. Service-learning research suggests that the long-term outcome from this involvement as a student is increased civic engagement throughout their lives (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Enhancing students' perception of the value of civic engagement to their professional career reinforces the likelihood that students will remain engaged.

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