

Learn and Serve: Integrating Elements of Social Learning Theory and Cross Cultural Exposure in Professional Preparation

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Abstract

The integration of experiential learning in the professional preparation of recreation and leisure services providers has consistently been at the forefront of concern in higher education and the field. Experiences that afford opportunities for cultural exposure and promote generational acceptance are critical to the preparation of our future professionals. The Learn and Serve: Tillery Project represented a partnership between the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies and an economically disadvantaged rural community comprised predominantly of elderly African Americans. This partnership began with a community walking trail project and expanded into the provision of special events, an after-school program for the youth of the community, and a recreational therapy home visitation program for homebound, frail elderly residents. The Tillery Project offered opportunities to establish a renewed sense of commitment to practice in higher education. The project represents a unique partnership between pre-professional education and community service. Through the integration of elements of Social Learning Theory, student directed activities achieved sustained levels of mutual benefit to the participant, student, university, and community.

Keywords: social learning theory, social commitment, cross-cultural exposure, and pre-professional education.

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Introduction

Components of “good teaching” go beyond the simple task of disseminating information and often include opportunities for critical thinking, experiential learning and the exploration of humanistic and cultural values. Within the realm of academia, putting “theory into practice” often proves to be a difficult task. An even greater challenge is creating opportunities to actually experience cultural diversity and cross-generation differences. Learning opportunities that provide cross-cultural and generational analysis can profoundly reinforce ethical values, resulting in learning experiences that can be extremely rewarding for both students and participants (Valerius, Keller, Doyle & Collins, 1998). Ideally, experiences of this nature can also serve as the foundation for a “sense of calling” and provide students with a critical understanding of the professional imperative of social commitment. The effectiveness of this approach is well established, as noted by Jensen (1998), “...we have known community service learning as one of the most important ways of establishing civic engagement” (p.79). These types of experiences parallel the elements of Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986; Rosenstock, Strecher, & Becker, 1988) and allow for the incorporation of such theoretical underpinnings into the educational process (Parcel & Baranowski, 1981). This paper describes a designed effort to incorporate several of the components of Social Learning Theory (SLT) into the professional preparation of students majoring in recreation and leisure studies (RCLS) with the goal of increasing their sense of social commitment and understanding of differing cultures.

Social Learning Theory in Professional Preparation

Social Learning Theory is grounded on the belief that human behavior is explained by the dynamic interaction of personal factors, environmental influences, and individual behavior (Glanz & Rimer, 1995). The theory postulates that changes in behavior are the result of the dynamic interaction between the individual and his/her environment (*reciprocal determinism*). The application of reciprocal determinism is reinforced within curricula when students actively interact within the social environment (*en vivo*). Not only does the student emerge with a new sense of personal awareness and commitment; the consumer with whom they interact is also often effected. “The evidence for the health-enhancing effects of affective support suggests that, whenever possible, interactions with potential helpers should facilitate expressions of trust, closeness, and caring. In addition, the importance of reciprocity for well-being suggests that helping relationships should be founded on a basis of mutual interdependence and exchange” (Heaney & Israel, 1997,187-188). Social Learning Theory underscores the importance of interpersonal dimensions, including the concept that in order to effect change, an individual

must know what to do and how to do it (*behavioral capability*). The individual must also possess a notion of what they think will occur (*expectation*), and have the confidence in their ability to perform a task or action (*self-efficacy*). In addition, concepts of *observational learning*, *modeling*, and *reinforcement* become powerful elements for value development, change and commitment.

The application of SLT to educational settings is essential if we are truly going to affect change within value systems and successfully develop a sense of commitment in students. Such application was a goal of the Tillery Project, a Learn to Serve grant program sponsored by the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies (RCLS) at East Carolina University (ECU). The project was implemented within the social and physical network of the town of Tillery, NC, a working experiential laboratory for the RCLS students. "The environment in which behavior is performed is important in both the operant and social learning theory approaches in that it provides both the discriminative stimuli and the reinforcers" (Parcel & Baranowski, 1981, p. 14).

As Valerius, Keller, Doyle & Collins (1998) have suggested: "In-class and small-group discussions have their place in the learning process, but to truly engage the student in higher-order learning experiences, educators may have to get students out of the confines of the classroom and into the community" (p.56). With this goal in mind, the Department of RCLS sponsored several direct learning experiences within the community of Tillery, NC. The guiding objectives of these projects were to incorporate elements of Social Learning Theory and to afford opportunities for community service and exposure to cultural diversity. Each project generated significant benefits and higher-level learning opportunities for all parties vested in the program.

Welcome to Tillery, NC

Tillery is a small rural crossroads community located in Halifax County in eastern North Carolina. Current demographics reflect a community of 1,500 citizens of whom 98% are African American and 60% are elderly. The community is economically challenged with 90% of its residents living below the federal poverty level. Due to geographic and economic limitations, approximately 80% of the residents of Tillery do not have access to regular health care. Many typical community amenities are non-existent in Tillery. There is no public transportation or taxi service. Children attend school outside their community, enduring a 45-minute bus ride each way. Thus, no school-related activities or formal cultural programs are available. The town has no formal community recreation facilities.

Although Tillery may lack the key resources necessary to make it an economically competitive community, its strength lies in the spirit of its people. Located in one of the largest former plantation counties in the state, Tillery residents have struggled since the period of slavery to overcome racial and economic barriers. The community's legacy of

social and economic setbacks is well documented. However, their collective effort to overcome such difficulties through community activism is also quite noteworthy. From the beginning of their community during the reconstruction period following the Civil War, to the establishment of their modern day organization *Concerned Citizens of Tillery* (CCT), the people of Tillery have demonstrated a unique sense of strength and pride in their community and a continuing commitment to improve the lives of the collective.

Tillery has a long history of independence and self-advocacy, resulting in a model community of self-reliance. During the past, the community has resisted the need to accept outside assistance. However, the community has made an exception and opened its doors to the Learn to Serve grant program.

Learn and Serve Grant Program

The Learn and Serve grant program was initiated in 1995 and has provided essential health related services to the Tillery community. The grant program is funded by Learn and Serve America: Higher Education Provisions, a sponsored program of the Corporation For National Service as authorized by the National and Community Service Act of 1990. Learn and Serve America supports efforts to make service an integral part of the education and life experiences of the students in the nation's colleges and universities. Learn and Serve America project funding supports campus-based service-learning programs that directly and demonstratively benefit both the community served and the students who serve. The three broad-based objectives of the Learn and Serve Program are:

1. To engage students in meeting the unmet educational, public safety, human, and environmental needs of communities;
2. To enhance student academic learning, their sense of social responsibility, and their civic skills through service-learning; and
3. To increase the number, quality, and sustainability of opportunities for students to serve by strengthening infrastructure and building capacity within and across the nation's institutions of higher education.

The purpose of the Tillery-ECU Learn and Serve project is to encourage interdisciplinary service learning among health related disciplines of the university while at the same time improving the health and well-being of Tillery citizens. Working in conjunction with the well established community organization *Concerned Citizens of Tillery*, the Learn and Serve project addresses the needs of several community groups through a variety of social and health directed programs.

For over a decade, East Carolina University (ECU), the ECU School of Medicine and the small town of Tillery, NC have shared a unique service partnership. This relationship has allowed ECU students to gain valuable learning experiences in and from

ferred by university students and faculty. This formal partnership between ECU and CCT has created a mutually beneficial program in which both participating parties have achieved success. The Department of RCLS and its students have contributed to this successful partnership by sponsoring a number of innovative and enjoyable activities that have bridged the gap between learning and the concepts of social commitment, service delivery and community improvement.

Working under the auspices of the “Learn and Serve” grant program, RCLS students have sponsored and conducted several community projects that have addressed the recreation and health services needs of the community. While these projects have ranged in scope from one-day community celebrations to comprehensive therapy sessions, they have all shared a common goal and outcome: to improve the quality of life for Tillery citizens while providing students with an opportunity for service education.

Integrating Elements of Social Learning Theory into Educational Practice

The pre-professional preparation of recreation and therapeutic recreation majors should be based on sound practice and an accepted theoretical foundation. As an aspect of professional preparation, the inclusion of projects within the Tillery Community is based upon the elements that reflect the principles of the Social Learning Theory (SLT). Within the Tillery project, the application of elements of SLT was not limited to just the pre-professional students but includes the Tillery residents as well.

The project promoted a dynamic exchange (*reciprocal determinism*) between the students and faculty of the university and the residents of the community of Tillery. From the university’s perspective, the students are engaged in formal education to develop the *behavioral capacity to affect change*. This *learned behavior* is acquired from educational knowledge derived from course work, which then is demonstrated and reinforced via student work in the community. The newly developed student *capabilities* are further supported by the *expectation* of what will occur as a result of participation in the project. The direct experience dimension also reinforces a sense of *self-efficacy* for the student as well as the recipients of the service. Through program interaction, both the students and participants receive valuable insight into possible avenues for change (*behavioral change*), lessons in interpersonal relations, as well as a host of skill development opportunities. Each program allows for the reciprocal exchange of learning experiences between students, faculty and participants. Ultimately, this dynamic relationship (*reciprocal determinism*) promotes opportunities for interpersonal and community change that contribute to healthier lifestyles and instills in the students a sense of professional and personal commitment.

To integrate the Tillery Project into the curriculum, only minor modifications were required. The initiative for the project had to be incorporated into either the existing laboratory segment of the Recreation Programming course, required practicum hours of students enrolled in other courses of the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies (RCLS), or as volunteer experiences of the RCLS Majors' Association or individual interests. The most difficult aspect was accessing the community. Vans, assigned to the School of Health and Human Performance, were accessed to facilitate student transportation to and from the site for the scheduled program offerings.

While only minor modifications were needed in the curriculum structure, elements that enhanced understanding and sensitivity were also required. Individual and group briefing and debriefing sessions were incorporated into the overall project in order to facilitate learning among the student participants. Since the students were being integrated into a new environment, (i.e., predominantly African American, economically challenged, rural setting), efforts to promote understanding and sensitivity were essential. Sessions were held prior to and following each program offering, and additional opportunities for briefing and debriefing were accessed during the 75-minute transit to and from the site.

In order to generate a more formal feedback mechanism, students who engaged in program offerings were interviewed regarding their perception of their experiences. They were also requested to complete open-ended questionnaires regarding their personal reaction to the project. The outcomes of these discussions often reflected elements of SLT principles. An overview of some of the projects sponsored through the Learn and Serve grant program by the Department of RCLS and students' reactions to specific learning experiences follow.

Tillery After-School Program. As part of the Learn and Serve grant program, an after school program was established in Tillery during the spring 1998 academic semester. In direct application of the STL principle of *reciprocal determinism*, faculty and students from the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies met with leaders from the Concerned Citizens of Tillery and interested parents to create an after-school initiative. The After-School program was an experiential learning project incorporated into the requirements of a recreation program-planning course. All students enrolled in the course were required to participate in the project. Much of the planning occurred during the class-meeting time of the course, while program delivery occurred during an accompanying leadership lab. The fact that the lab only met one day a week for two hours was a limitation of the class. Therefore, the after-school program could only be conducted one day each week. Since this course is the first programming course RCLS students encounter, general programming and leadership concepts were taught during the first half of the semester and program implementation was addressed during the latter eight weeks of the term.

The 75-minute drive from ECU to Tillery posed a logistical problem of distance. The time involved in travel and program delivery amounted to five hours per session. While students were required to adjust their schedules to accommodate this five-hour time block, all were willing to commit in order to work with the participants. There were two sections of the programming course and students had an opportunity to choose another section, which involved local projects. The inherent challenges of the Tillery community project served as an incentive for students to enroll in this particular section.

A unique aspect of this program was that community leaders requested the involvement of children of all ages. As a result, there were participants from 3 to 19 years of age ($n = 29$). The lack of community recreation facilities provided another obstacle to the class. The activities conducted during this project were generally new activity experiences for the participants. Program formats included individual activities, small and large groups, and family involvement. Students were divided into groups of four or five and assigned two program days each. Activity themes included outdoor education (camp skills, orienteering, etc.), multicultural recreation, new games and activities (cards, origami, etc.), and group initiatives (*behavioral change*). Additionally, all students collaborated on planning a final program day that involved a ropes course experience for the children and their parents. The nature of the ropes' experience reinforced the realization that dynamic relationships developed as a result of the after-school program. Participants, parents, and students established a sense of mutual commitment and investment in the project.

Beyond the obvious lessons involving program delivery in a small town setting, the diverse participant population proved to be a challenge to the students. Many of the students had never been to a small rural town, in which many of the local activities are "homespun" and based upon a close network of relatives and family friends. The fact that Tillery is primarily an agricultural-based community consisting predominately of individuals of African American decent, proved to be a cultural awakening for many of the suburban/urban raised Caucasian college students.

Therapeutic Recreation Intervention Program. The Learn to Serve grant project provided an excellent opportunity to initiate a therapeutic recreation intervention program (TRIP) for homebound residents of the Tillery community. Reflecting a common profile of many communities, Tillery has elderly individuals who are both medically frail and socially isolated. The purpose of the TRIP project was to provide an opportunity for therapeutic recreation majors to gain valuable experiences working with traditionally underserved homebound elderly. The TRIP project was implemented during the fall of 1998 and involved a total of 10 therapeutic recreation majors (8 undergraduates and 2-graduate student supervisors), and 4 residents of Tillery. The TRIP aspect of the overall project further reinforced elements of SLT including *expectation, self-efficacy, and behavioral capacity* for both the students and the residents.

The first phase of the project involved the development and implementation of a need assessment to determine qualified candidates for therapeutic recreation services. The need assessment was designed to collect data regarding the personal demographics and functional capacity of identified homebound residents. Once qualified individuals were determined ($n = 4$), the therapeutic recreation majors, under the supervision of the faculty and graduate student supervisors, selected, implemented and analyzed more specific assessment information to determine the functional level of each participant. Based upon assessment findings, students designed and implemented individual therapeutic recreation intervention plans. Data recording and documentation were initiated for each of the four residents.

The TRIP program provided positive results for both groups of participants, residents and students. Although the program was conducted for only 2 sessions per week for 6 weeks, students reported positive experiences in providing services to homebound elderly. Noted learning experiences transcended the scope of therapeutic recreation and included *self-efficacy*, cross-cultural sensitivity, realization of *behavioral capacity*, and increased understanding of the aging process, and the impact of low economic and isolated environments. The elderly participants of the TRIP program reflected that the increased opportunity to engage in social programming and “to have visitors” was worth their involvement in the project and met or exceeded their *expectations*.

Building a Community Walking Trail. The significance of the walking trail initiative is that it represented the first recreational facility within the Tillery community. Adult residents had expressed an interest (*reciprocal determinism*) in an area where they could exercise in a safe environment (rather than walking down a state highway) and the Department of RCLS worked with them to create a vision. A fundamental requirement of the design of this trail was that it allows for social interaction. Hence, the trail was designed at a width of six feet. The trail is located adjacent to the Tillery Community Center, a facility that serves as the hub of community interaction (*behavioral change*). Locating the trail in this area is consistent with the health focus of the Tillery community, and provides an easily accessible and safe walking area.

Unlike other RCLS-Tillery programs, this project was not formally integrated into a university course. Instead, students served as non-academic credit volunteers. Two Recreation and Leisure Studies (RCLS) student volunteers assumed the roles of co-trail managers and were integral contributors in organizational and developmental tasks. A total of 38 ECU students from RCLS, Exercise and Sports Science and Health Education volunteered their time and energy in constructing the trail. In addition, an interested parent also became highly involved in the design and construction of the bridge building aspect of the project. The trail project was planned and all work was completed (aside from a bridge) within 3 months. Coordination of materials was one of the most time consuming elements. A \$3,500 matching mini-grant was awarded from the Learn and Serve grant for trail development. National companies, including Lowe’s and Georgia Pacific, helped matched the grant through the donation of building materials. Local com-

panies discounted the physical moving and delivery of construction materials (e.g., landscape timbers, gravel and wood chips). The project budget was supplemented significantly by community contributions of food, supplies, labor and equipment.

A unique contributor in the construction of the trail was the Tillery State Correctional Institution. Prison inmates volunteered to assist the university students and community members with the project. Monthly trail maintenance is currently handled by *volunteer inmate labor*.

The educational outcomes derived from the project went beyond the scope of site design and building construction and included social and behavioral facets. Student participation in this unique project rendered opportunities to work beside individuals from completely different cultures than they were accustomed to back on campus. The project illustrated to the students the important concept that by laying aside individual differences and by working in harmony, communities can accomplish significant improvements (*reciprocal determinism*). An unexpected by-product of the walking trail project was the involvement of the prison inmates, who also experienced the opportunity to interact with the community and gain greater insight about their own lives. This is most evident in the following reactions by some of the participating inmates:

“It is nice to help the community, there’s not much to do in this area. This gives everyone something to do.”

“(This) makes us proud. I feel like I’ve accomplished something. I plan to come back and check it out in four months when I’m out.”

“This beats picking up trash. It gives us some experience in case you want to get a landscaping type job in the future.”

Discussion of Student Participants’ Experiences

Social Learning Theory emphasizes the premise that individual behaviors change as a result of the dynamic interaction between the individual and their social environment. Outcomes of the Learn and Serve project as an aspect of professional preparation were quite apparent in the written interview statements of the student participants. In summary, several specific outcomes related to the broadly defined goals of the Learn and Serve Project and elements of SLT were realized through the Tillery Project including a commitment to serve, cultural exposure and sensitivity, intergenerational sensitivity, and practice competence.

Commitment to Serve

Today it often appears that recreation and leisure service professionals and students have lost their moral compass with regard to the commitment to help individuals in

need. We have strayed from the roots of our profession as a result of increased demands to produce revenue and to conduct service delivery as a business. (Sessoms, 1992). Our historical foundation regarding professional commitment is based on the premise that as recreation and therapeutic recreation professionals, we have a moral obligation to serve humankind without exclusion. The Tillery project revisits this commitment and underscores the need to reinforce a sense of moral obligation within the participating students. Through the varied experiences offered by the Tillery Project, students were exposed "first hand" to the concept of serving those less fortunate than themselves. The students aptly demonstrated this revitalized commitment via the following reactions as recorded in their own written record:

"I really learned some things about myself (*self-efficacy and behavioral change*).... The saying, 'it takes a community to raise a child' seems to be intact here... I have grown from this experience."

"I feel better about myself knowing that we might have taught those children something or that we might have made an impact on somebody's life."

"I hope that this program will show that people care about one another (*reciprocal determinism*) and will challenge us all to do great things with our lives."

"Working toward a common goal (i.e. building a bridge), we became friends and looked forward to coming back the next day to continue working on the bridge (*expectation*)."

Opportunities to expose students to a sense of moral obligation and community service must be incorporated into curriculum design and course offerings. Students need to be taught that professional responsibility reaches beyond the concepts of receiving payment for service and involves acting ethically. Failure to instill such lessons will relegate community service to a mere bookmark of our professional past.

Cultural Exposure

The need for understanding in working with persons of differing cultures and ethnicity was another critical area addressed by the project. Tillery is a poor rural southern community that is predominantly comprised of African American residents. As a result of the Learn and Serve program, students and residents alike were exposed to unfamiliar cultural practices and behaviors. The dynamic interaction (*reciprocal determinism*) between the individual and the environment appeared an effective catalyst in altering the perceptions and behaviors (*behavioral change*) of both the ECU students and the Tillery participants of all age groups. Understanding the struggles, perspectives, and needs of individuals of differing backgrounds and experiences is fundamental to effective programming and to the development of professional competence (*self-efficacy*) (Holland, 1997; Hollister & Hodgson, 1996; Lee & Skalko, 1996). When asked to reflect upon their experience, the students offered an interesting mix of reactions.

“Working in Tillery was an interesting learning experience in that I met people with different life experiences than any I had ever experienced. They were very accepting and willing to work with me (*reciprocal determinism*)....”

“After spending time at Tillery, I became comfortable with the children and the adults alike. It didn’t matter that they were of a (sic) -different ethnic background, because I enjoyed being able to impart friendship to them.... Perhaps all of us can learn from one another”

“I realized that there isn’t that much of a difference between black kids and white kids-they all just want to have fun.”

“I felt that even if we did not know each other, we had something in common.”

“My feelings really didn’t change except this experience made me want to learn more about their culture.”

“The kids tested each one of us the first day we met with them. I think they expected us to be “bad” people just because we were white. It was expected because they were brought up thinking that all white people were evil due to incidences that happened a long time ago (*behavioral change*).”

Exposure to different cultures and ethnic groups is an essential aspect of an effective professional preparation program. “More than ever recreation professionals will be expected to work with, and have significant knowledge and understanding of, individuals from many cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds” (Holland, 1997, p.43). Through well-planned educational experiences, such understanding and sensitivity can be realized. It appears that the inclusion of such programs as Learn and Serve do make a difference.

Intergenerational Experiences

Student involvement within the Tillery community has been incorporated across several educational experiences. Not only have experiences been integrated in the recreation programming classes, but they have also been included within independent projects, special events and in therapeutic recreation course practica. This varied approach has provided recreation and therapeutic recreation students the opportunity to experience service delivery involving individuals of varying age groups via after-school programming and in-home health services with older adults.

Students enrolled in the RCLS programming course were involved in sponsoring activities in an after-school program designed by the class. Therapeutic recreation students were involved in a home visitation program for homebound elderly adults. Under supervision, the students were actively engaged in the delivery of therapeutic activities designed to meet the assessed needs of the older adult. These experiences have provided

students with opportunities for insight regarding aging adults and their efforts to remain independent in a small rural community. Students' expressed learning accomplishments are in part, represented by the following:

"I learned more about interacting with individuals at a variety of different ages which I feel will help me in the future (*self-efficacy*)."

"The main thing that surprised me was how well the younger kids related to us. I had at least five kids come up to me after each trip to Tillery and give me a hug and ask when I was coming next (*behavioral change*)."

"Its more comfortable for me to work in her (participant's) home because I learn more about her there."

"This is the first time I have worked with older adult. There has not been much of an adjustment because my client has been very receptive (*reciprocal determinism*)."

"I was impressed with the strong sense of community support. They make sure that they care for the home bound elderly."

Practice Competence

Possessing confidence in the ability to complete a task (mastery and self-efficacy) is one of the critical dimensions of Social Learning Theory. Through involvement in the Tillery Learn and Serve project, the students and participants developed a sense of competence and *self-efficacy*. This is reflected in the students' reactions:

"We as leaders need to stay on course with creativity ."

"Leaders should realize that heading up a program is not only informing, but also persuading the consumer to participate."

"This was a great challenge for me, and I feel more confident because of this experience....This is an experience I will never forget because of what I've learned."

"This experience was awesome. I gained an enormous amount of knowledge (*self-efficacy*) by just spending three days with those children."

"This is one of the challenges that I will face throughout my life, and this program helped me with interacting with kids below poverty and who were African-American."

"...I miss the whole experience. It made me a better person and a more capable leader."

"This experience has enhanced my confidence in leading programs for individuals that are culturally different than myself."

Far too often, we as educators rely on the university educational core courses to instill a sense of cultural understanding and competence in dealing with diverse cultures (Holland, 1997). It is only through planned and direct service delivery involving persons from all walks of life that the student begins to develop the competence to address the multitude of unique needs that exist across cultures, ability levels, ages, and genders.

Conclusion

The call for student involvement beyond the classroom environment has been a reoccurring theme within academia. One objective of such interaction is to provide practical experience that instills a sense of social commitment. This "call to practice" approach is well grounded in the social-learning literature and is most supported in the applied aspects of Social Learning Theory. The Learn and Serve Program established between ECU and the community of Tillery represents one method to response to this charge. As a result, students have gained immensely with respect to conceptual knowledge, technical skills, and a sense of personal commitment. Likewise, the residents of Tillery have also benefited by realizing an expansion in medical and social services and by experiencing significant gains in their quality of life. Efforts like the Tillery project are not easily accomplished considering the substantial demands of time, energy, and logistical planning. However, experiences of this nature are critical to the development of future recreation and leisure professionals and serve as the type of educational activity that may well influence them for the rest of their lives.

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