
Opening the Eyes of Students

The First Step Toward Service-Learning

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Abstract

Educators face ongoing challenges of how to motivate students and inspire them to make a difference in their communities. Trying to tackle this challenge all at once is just not practical. Service-learning is a very important part of educating students. The first step is to expose students to the difficulties faced by the underserved populations in their community, by creating an activity that simulates what life could be like if faced with these same conditions. The central component of our activity was to have the students navigate a series of experiences in order to achieve the assigned task. During the activity, students were prohibited from using many of the privileged conveniences (i.e. cell phones, personal vehicles and laptops) which are not always accessible to underserved populations. Upon completion of the activity, students participated in both a verbal and written reflection of their experiences.

KEYWORDS: Service-learning, community service, experiential education

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Before educators can even think of opening students' eyes, they must first understand how the brain works in order to figure out the best way to get them to see beyond their perception of the world. "We have powerful evidence that embedding intense emotions—such as those that occur with celebration, competition, or drama—in an activity may stimulate the release of adrenaline, which may more strongly encode the memory of the learning" (Jensen, 2003, p. 77). Memories are made stronger when there is an emotional attachment. This learning activity provides the students with an opportunity to make an emotional connection.

Before this emotional connection can be made, educators must recognize that students do not arrive as empty hard drives waiting to be filled with their wealth of knowledge. The students have their own thoughts and ideas about how the world works. Breunig (2005) noted that "students arrive in the critical classroom with their individual expectations, hopes, dreams, diverse backgrounds, and life experiences, including a long history of previous schooling and educational hegemony" (p. 118). By the time students reach the classroom, they have already been influenced by numerous authority figures. Parents/guardians play a major role in shaping their beliefs, as well as other family members, friends, teachers, media, and society in general. As educators, we need to be aware these opinions exist and their impact on students' views of service-learning as either a positive or necessary experience.

When looking at the beliefs that students bring with them to class, educators must also recognize the hegemonic (the dominant culture) influence on those beliefs. Brookfield (1997) described the issue of hegemony as the "cultural air we breathe," and that the "hegemonic assumptions are those that we embrace eagerly because we think they are in our own best interests. Yet perversely, these assumptions actually work against us in the long term and serve the purposes of those who do not have our best interests at heart" (p. 18). Overcoming the hegemonic assumptions the students bring with them becomes the first obstacle. Educators should develop ways for students to recognize and see beyond the hegemony that has infiltrated their lives. Hegemony's influence has "become part and parcel of everyday life—the stock opinions, conventional wisdoms, or commonsense ways of seeing and ordering the world that people take for granted" (p. 18). In order to change the students' perspective, we need to open their eyes to the world around them. As a result, students are exposed to things they have never truly seen and that may be a little uncomfortable. Many educators are looking for ways to overcome this problem by developing strategies to open students' minds to new ways of seeing the world (Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

The development of this learning activity achieved the outcome of exposing the challenges faced by a segment of the population, of which many students may be unaware. This learning activity was created for a class comprised of undergraduate students in their first semester as recreation and leisure studies majors. Specifically, this course dealt with critical issues and how they impact recreation and leisure studies programs, with the goal of achieving the following two outcomes: 1) Discuss the legal foundations, regulatory agents, and responsibilities of leisure service agencies in serving people of diverse backgrounds and needs and 2) Compare and contrast diversity across social, cultural, and ability levels (Powell & Johnson, 2008).

An initial step for this learning activity was to have the students define what an underserved population represents. In this context, an underserved population was defined as those individuals who have limited means and ability to access public services and agencies. Additionally, this learning activity achieved the goal of embedding service-learning experiences into the course. Service-learning is a form of experiential learning where students apply academic knowledge and critical thinking skills to address genuine community needs through organized service experiences (Berv, 1998). A simple option would have been to send the students on a “scavenger hunt” for information and hope that they make the connection between the learning activity and service-learning on their own. Unfortunately, Breunig (2005) states “that experiences that lack intention, purpose, and direction most often simply represent play. Play is fun; but play is not always enough, especially if there is some educational end toward which the practice (experience) is directed” (p.107). In order for students to get the most out of this activity, they needed the added structure and guidance that would allow them to understand the intent of the goals the activity was trying to accomplish.

One way to help students make connections is with reflective journaling. The process of journaling “provides a vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions” (Hubbs & Brand, 2005, p. 62). The way in which students are allowed to journal can vary from activity to activity, but the process should be similar. It is important to allow them the opportunity to reflect upon their experience and share that experience with other students in the class. During this process, it will help all of the “students develop a greater awareness of their abilities to work for change and social justice” (Jakubowski, 2003, p.31).

Description of the Learning Activity

The learning activity began at the public library where the students listened to a 10-minute presentation on how people utilize a variety of library resources. Students were assigned to groups of three or four and given a direction sheet, scenario, and a city bus map with the location of their destination marked on the map. Each group was given explicit directions that they were to go to only one location and not to role play, but were to use the scenario as context for a discussion with employees at their destination. These elements were crucial so that the students did not interfere with the community agencies and detract from citizens who truly needed assistance. A separate activity in which the students focused on role playing similar situations was completed earlier in the semester, so it was important the students understand this was not the same situation.

Another restriction we placed on the students was the use of privileged conveniences. Many people in our community do not have access to cell phones, personal automobiles, or laptop computers, so we did not allow our students this access. It is important to remember that most students have not lived without a cell phone, so we informed them that they should have change available for a pay phone, if necessary, and should not use a cell phone unless it was an actual emergency. They were to utilize the city bus map to get to their destination and return to the library.

As we mentioned earlier, journaling is an important part of the reflective process, yet it comes in all shapes and sizes. For this activity, we had them do a group reflection instead of what would be considered traditional journaling. After completing their task, the students were to return to the library and hand in a debrief sheet that had them discuss the “what,” “so what,” and “now what” of the learning activity. This step allowed them the opportunity to discuss what they experienced during the activity, why it matters to them, and finally how they will use this information in their professional careers.

Desired Learning Outcomes and Recommendations

The goal of this learning activity was to provide the students with a unique experience to help them become more aware of the real challenges some people face every day. Additionally, it served as a springboard for discussing the complexity of the responsibility leisure services has in serving all populations. Whether planning community events or developing workshops for underserved populations, it is important to keep in mind the difficulties people in the community may have in finding transportation to the event, or even being aware of the time of day in which the event is offered. These are issues that many community members face every day and it is important that leisure service professionals consider those issues when planning activities.

As educators, we like to say that we are learning right along with our students. During this learning activity, we did learn that at least one person in the community appreciated what we were trying to accomplish. While the students were returning and handing in their assignments, a conversation with a man who was sitting in the library occurred. He was curious about why all these students were coming in and telling stories about their adventures. Upon hearing the explanation, he genuinely seemed to appreciate that the university was interested in teaching college students what life is like for other members of their community. During the conversation, he stated that he had recently been released from prison and was fortunate that a local contractor had hired him and given him the opportunity to get back on his feet. When he saw the list (see Table 1) of the tasks the students were asked to perform, he stated that he had performed, at one time or another, all the tasks. The conversation with him confirmed that this learning activity was helping our students get a better understanding of their community.

This learning activity can be utilized as a first step for any class looking for a way to include service-learning into the coursework. Political science students could focus on activities that include governmental agencies and see how policies affect the citizens of a community. An activity that takes business students to soup kitchens and homeless shelters could emphasize the importance of corporate community service programs. There are no limitations to this learning activity based on the size of the class as the tasks are performed in small groups.

Table 1: List of Places and Scenarios

Full descriptions:

- **County School Board:** You are a new citizen of Athens-Clarke County. You need to find where to register your children for the upcoming year. After arriving at the county district office, secure all of the information about documents needed to register one child at an elementary school.
- **Catholic Charities:** You are a family of six now, and providing food and clothing is becoming more difficult. To make matters more challenging, you do not speak English. Find the local Catholic Charity and find out what services they provide. Bring back a listing of what they offer. You cannot speak during your journey (unless you speak Spanish). Once you arrive at the location, you may use your English.
- **Technical College:** At the age of 18, you realize that working two jobs at minimum wage is not getting you where you envision you want to go with your life. You wonder about some type of extra training or schooling. A friend suggested Athens Tech. Figure out the procedure for enrolling in some training class at Athens Tech and get a list of the steps necessary and a list of the courses/majors they provide.
- **Bond Service:** Your child is in jail for shoplifting and bond was set at \$1,000. Locate the Bond Company and secure a specific rate for this bond. What forms of payment do they accept? If you need a money order, how can you get one and how much does it cost?

Shortened description for this article:

- **Courthouse:** You signed an agreement with “No Right of Early Termination” so the penalties have just been compounding. Today, it’s pay or go to jail. Locate the courtroom and get the name of one judge.
- **Jail:** Locate the office and gather all of the information you need to bail your child out of jail.
- **Homeless Shelter:** (Don’t go inside) Find the shelter off of Barber Street and write a paragraph about your perceptions of the accessibility of this facility as might be seen through the eyes of a single parent with children. (Challenges, fears, and concerns)
- **Department of Labor:** Find the Department of Labor and figure out the process of applying for unemployment.
- **Utility Services:** Locate the water business office and see if they will take a check for the delinquent account. Locate the power company and get your power turned back on.
- **Scholarship for Country Leisure Service program:** Secure a registration form and scholarship form for the after-school program.

- **Housing Authority:** Find an application for public housing.
- **Our Daily Bread:** Locate Our Daily Bread and figure out the requirements to receive assistance.
- **Public Health Department:** Find the process for getting a copy of your health records.
- **Division of Family and Children Services:** Secure an application for food stamps.
- **Health Clinic:** Ask for a pamphlet about available pregnancy services.
- **Community Connection:** You lost your job last Friday and a cashier at Kroger told you about Community Connection. Secure a pamphlet about the services and opportunities they offer.

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