

Student Perspectives on the Impact of Service Learning on the Educational Experience

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Abstract

A research study investigated student perspectives on service learning during the TRAIL to Wellness program, a four-week leisure education program for veterans being treated for substance abuse. The research explored the students' perspectives on their own learning at the end of 15 weeks. Based upon the content analysis of open-ended questions about the service learning program, several themes emerged: 1) classroom preparation improves the service learning experience, 2) service learning activities improve students' understanding of the therapeutic recreation process, and 3) the experience prompts self-awareness.

Keywords: *service learning; therapeutic recreation; recreational therapy; student perceptions*

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Those in academia have for years recognized the value of service learning activities to students in terms of positive test scores and degree of pro-social behaviors (Maynes, Hatt & Wideman, 2013; Peters, 2011). However, a paucity of research exists with regard to student perspectives about educational experiences associated with the service learning activities. This study evaluates students' perspectives on their learning during a program that was designed to teach leisure skills and awareness, through Leisure Education activities, to Wounded Warriors (those military personnel who have engaged in active duty since 9/11/2001).

Literature Review

This study evaluates undergraduate therapeutic recreation students' perspectives on their own learning as facilitators of a leisure education program designed for veterans of more recent conflicts who were being treated for substance abuse and PTSD. From a phenomenological approach, this research explores perspectives on the service learning process from the learner's point of view.

Service Learning

Service learning involves students in structured activities that relate classroom learning to real-life situations (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2013; Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Greco, 2013). Learning occurs through direct participation in programs or projects that are specifically related to classroom materials. Service learning is not simply providing service to another entity; that is volunteerism. Service learning is an instructional method that couples service outside of the typical learning environment with academic study. It is largely viewed as best practice in education (Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Greco, 2013).

Perhaps the most important distinction between volunteerism and service learning is the aspect of reflection that is required of individuals engaged in service learning. The analysis of project or program results, the sharing of those results, and reflection on the experience and on oneself in the experience are key components of service learning (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2013).

Studies indicate numerous benefits of service learning. For example, the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2013) indicates that effective service learning results in improved grades, improved attendance and the development of pro-social beliefs and behaviors. Service learning has been shown to have a positive effect on the understanding of social issues, personal insight, and cognitive development (Yorio & Feifei, 2012). In addition, service learning is seen as key to developing citizenship among college students (Al Barwani, Al-Mekhlafi, & Nagaratnam, 2013). Further evidence suggests that service learning impacts not only the social and cognitive domains, but also the emotional domain of the learners (Carson, & Domangue, 2013). Engaging learners in real-life situations that allow them to practice what they learn has led to improved self-efficacy in the learners (Bernadowski, Perry, & Del Greco, 2013).

In the United States, institutions of higher education are being solicited to not only provide career preparation but also to produce responsible citizens. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) challenged, "It is time to bring two national priorities—career preparation and increased access and completion rates—together in a more comprehensive vision with a third national priority: fostering informed, engaged, responsible citizens" (p. 13). Education must prepare professionals as well as responsible citizens. Engaging students in service learning is one means to that end.

Therapeutic Recreation

The American Therapeutic Recreation Association (ATRA) defines therapeutic recreation or recreational therapy as “a treatment service designed to restore, remediate and rehabilitate a person’s level of functioning and independence in life activities, to promote health and wellness as well as reduce or eliminate the activity limitations and restrictions to participation in life situations caused by an illness or disabling condition” (2009). More simply put, recreation therapists use recreational activities and treatment interventions to improve overall functioning in the people with whom they work.

One treatment technique used in therapeutic recreation (TR) is leisure education. According to Stumbo (2002), leisure education consists of services and activities that focus on the development of various leisure-related skills, attitudes, and knowledge. The overall goal of leisure education is improved quality of life. Participants in leisure education focus on developing skills that will help them during their leisure including, for example, actual activity skills, a positive attitude about the value of leisure, and awareness of leisure resources. Given that satisfactory leisure is an important aspect of overall quality of life, this treatment technique is ideal for those who lack meaningful leisure, no matter what the reason.

Wounded Warriors

The result of the continuous conflict from the last decade, Operations Enduring Freedom (OEF), Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and New Dawn (OND), is about 740,000 veterans some of whom survive with both physical and emotional damage. This group of veterans is also called “Wounded Warriors.” When wounded veterans first return to the United States, the focus is on survival. While physical rehabilitation and clinical care has improved, a problem exists with adequacy and effectiveness of reintegration back into the community (Glazer, 2010). Specifically, many veterans struggle with the more invisible problems of post traumatic stress disorder and addiction issues (Mowatt & Bennett, 2011). For veterans experiencing combat, post-traumatic stress disorders and addictive behaviors (Mcgruder, Frueh, Knapp, Johnson, Vaughan, Carson, et al., 2005) decrease veterans’ functional and wellness levels. Post-traumatic stress and addictive behaviors create barriers to healthy leisure participation. Just as a person with a physical disability may experience barriers to full participation, accessibility is limited for those with psychological disabilities as well due to personal, social, and attitudinal barriers. Similar problems also impact families of veterans (Dolan, Martindale, Robinson, Kimbrel, Meyer, Kruese, et al., 2011), creating a substantial public health issue.

Summary

Research suggests that service learning enhances student learning outcomes. Specifically, students engaged in therapeutic recreation coursework would benefit from practicing various TR interventions in real-life settings. While a body of research focuses on the learning outcomes from service learning, very little is known about students’ perspectives, from their point of view, on this particular type of learning. This research further explored those specific student reflections. Through this study, students were engaged in service learning by providing direct Leisure Education programs to Wounded Warriors. Students practiced techniques learned in the classroom in a real-life situation. The design of the leisure education activities directly focused on specific identified needs of the population served, allowing for practical application of the therapeutic recreation process. The study focused on student reflections after the service learning activities.

Methods

Participants

The participants in the study were 25 therapeutic recreation majors, who were in the last semester of their undergraduate coursework prior to participating in the required 560-hour therapeutic recreation internship. All 25 students were enrolled in the course *Therapeutic Recreation Interventions*, and all were required to participate in the service learning opportunity, a program titled, *TRAIL to Wellness*. TRAIL stands for Therapeutic Recreation and Independent Leisure. At the completion of the program, students were required to reflect on their experience by responding to a number of guiding questions. Appropriate internal review board procedures were followed and a purposeful sample of 13 reflection papers was obtained and analyzed in this study. Over half of the students submitted their reflection papers for analysis, which provided adequate saturation for answering the particular research question.

Procedure

The TRAILS to Wellness program occurred over four consecutive Monday afternoons, as follows:

1. **Program Orientation.** Service learning during this session included an explanation of the program, and ice-breaking group process activities. The activities were designed to help veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and addictions understand the purpose of leisure in their lives, the barriers to enjoyment that they experience, and to begin to develop strategies to improve their leisure and, therefore, their quality of life. In addition, the activities were designed to promote socialization among the veterans and student facilitators, in an effort to create a welcoming and comfortable environment.
2. **Storm Harbor Equestrian Center (SHEC).** This service learning session occurred at the SHEC, which is located on a university campus in rural western Pennsylvania. The veterans engaged in a number of horseback riding activities, based on their level of experience and comfort. All activities were delivered according to the current Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACAU) protocol. SHEC staff and student facilitators worked with the veterans to assure that each had an opportunity for success. Following the riding activities, the veterans and student facilitators gathered to discuss their experience, including feelings about it and leisure resources that could enable continuation of this activity at the end of the TRAILS to Wellness program.
3. **Aebersold Recreation Center (ARC).** In this service learning session, veterans and student facilitators were paired and offered opportunities to participate in a variety of leisure opportunities such as strength and conditioning, cardio fitness, the gym, the pool, the climbing wall, and the walking track available at the ARC, which is located on a university campus in rural western Pennsylvania. Following the activities, the veterans and student facilitators gathered to discuss their experience, their feelings, and possible leisure resources that would allow continued participation in this activity at the end of the TRAILS to Wellness program.
4. **Ropes Course.** Service learning on the final day occurred at the Leadership Development Ropes Course which is located on a university campus in rural western Pennsylvania.

The high ropes course experience, facilitated by the Director of Leadership Development at the facility, included a “challenge by choice” aspect. Student facilitators participated alongside the Veterans.

Student facilitators were assigned which week they would attend according to alphabetical order by last name. Six or seven students were assigned to participate in each week’s programming. Due to veterans’ courses of treatment and the VA hospital schedule, few of the veterans were able to complete all four sessions of the TRAIL program. The veteran population changed weekly as did the population of student programmers. Prior to the programming day, students and the faculty member reviewed the plans for the day and practiced various facilitation skills and techniques such as active listening and group leadership. In addition, students completed assigned reading from professional journal articles that focused on recreation participation of wounded veterans, transitioning back to society after active combat, and addiction and post-traumatic stress disorder among the target participants.

At the end of the program, students were required to write a reflection paper that responded to the following questions:

- **What did you learn?** Be thorough and specific. If you didn’t learn anything, what could be done to provide a better learning opportunity?
- **What was good?** What went well? Why do you think this was good? Why do you think it went well?
- **What did not go so well?** Why do you think this didn’t go so well? What would you suggest as an improvement?

Data collection. Student participants provided their reflections electronically to the faculty member. Students submitted the reflection electronically only if they were willing to participate in research. Reflections were stored in password protected file without any identifying information. After the reflection papers were written, the facilitating faculty member also gathered verbal comments from the students during their scheduled class time. Comments were recorded anonymously for possible use in this paper.

Analysis

The open-ended written student responses were analyzed for content to determine common themes. As the data was divided into meaning units (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), labels were also assigned. In order to better understand the patterns and themes of the students’ perspectives, the data was both sorted and categorized. One of the researchers’ field notes and memos were used to cross-check and verify the emerging themes.

Results

Although the students participated in different activity sessions with the veterans, consistent patterns emerged in the responses. In other words, the response to the service-learning was not determined by the activity. Three themes emerged: 1) classroom preparation improved the service learning experience, 2) service learning activities improved understanding of the therapeutic recreation process, and 3) the experience promoted self-awareness.

Classroom Improved Service Learning

According to the students' reflections, the classroom preparation prior to the service improved their experience. The coursework which appeared to impact the students the most included: 1) the practice of activities in the classroom, 2) the reading of research articles about veterans, and 3) the explanation of the leisure education process.

Practice. Almost half of the students' reflections indicated that practicing the group activities before the actual service learning session improved their ability and increased their confidence prior to the event. One student stated, "I realized the importance of practicing sessions and activities prior to implementing them. I felt much more confident going into the first session knowing I was familiar with and had previously practiced all the activities that were going to be taking place." Others mentioned that the practice sessions in the classroom helped them have a pre-planned idea of "what to say" rather than "waste time" or "create confusion."

Literature. Many students mentioned that their assigned research articles helped them get more from the service learning experience. For example, one shared, "The research really helped me get the perspective of the veterans, what some of them had gone through and how they are coping or how their lifestyles have changed. It was interesting reading the War Narratives because the veterans are telling their stories and not leaving anything out." Another seemed to think the diagnostic information assisted them, saying, "I liked knowing about PTSD and addiction coming into the program because I had the opportunity to see if the client had any characteristics now."

Leisure education. Most students mentioned in their reflection that the teaching in the classroom on leisure education helped prepare them for the service learning experience. One student indicated the ability to observe all the aspects of leisure education during their sessions with the veterans. She stated that "all four of the intervention activities provided diverse opportunities for the veterans to gain a new repertoire of leisure interests." Others compared what they expected from the classroom instruction to the real life experience, saying, "I thought at the end of the session the leisure education would be more concrete... I thought it went well because it was more of a conversation than looking at a paper with the questions." The students compared classroom learning about processing or "debriefing" the activity at the end of one session and found it lacking appropriate emphasis, noting, "I felt that she should have connected the initiatives more to everyday life and especially leisure itself... but I think more processing would have been beneficial." The comparison of classroom teaching to real life experience promoted critical thinking about leisure education sessions in the future.

Service Learning Improved Understanding of TR Process

Not only did the classroom content promote a better service learning experience, the service learning experience allowed students to apply book knowledge of the therapeutic recreation process to a real life situation. A majority of the reflections discussed planning and implementation which are two of the steps in the therapeutic recreation process.

Planning. Most of the student reflections mentioned how important program planning was to success of the program. Most students described the sessions as well-planned, with one saying, "I feel that the program was very well planned because we as students knew what was going to happen in each session before meeting the clients ... Hearing about the detailed schedule made me feel like the leaders knew what they were doing and sounded confident about the program." Others pointed out if they were to do it again, they would

have marketed the program better to increase the number of veterans. Overall, the practical experience emphasized to the students how important program planning is to success.

It is important to note that while individual treatment planning and goal setting are essential to the typical TR planning process, due to the nature of this program and the availability of participants, individual assessment was not possible. The program was planned according to veterans' needs that were identified through research articles and knowledge of the diagnostic criteria for addiction/abuse and PTSD, rather than through direct individual assessment.

Communication during implementation. The students reflected on the specific skills which improved as a result of the service learning. Several mentioned an improvement in observation skills. Over half of the students discussed an improvement in communication skills such as learning to ask the right questions or conversing as part of the activity. One student commented, "I learned to ask the right questions and not questions that could lead the client into talking about their diagnosis." Another discussed an improvement in word choice, noting, "It was really important to give clear descriptive instructions. Vernacular words that we know at the university are not the same outside of the university."

Motivation during implementation. Others mentioned the benefit of the natural environment, such as the trail ride on horseback, which allowed them a better opportunity for conversation. Other important implementation skills emerged in the reflections. A few of the students described learning about client motivation for active participation and promoting independence. One student identified "encouragement" as being particularly important for the veterans who were engaging in activities that were new to them. The student wrote, "This was a great experience to see because even though they were nervous, almost all of them completed one of the challenges with encouragement. I remember specifically watching one of the men up on the tightrope cable and he was shaking and I could see in his face that he was very nervous but as soon as he was done he said, "That was awesome!" One student specifically learned more about promoting independence, as exemplified by her statement, "I asked if I could help but he insisted that he was going to do it and I was all for that attitude. After he finished with the tacking he said how grateful he was for just letting him do it and for being patient with him." Some of the other students noted that modeling the skill was an important precursor to motivation, adding, "Another way we, the students, got some of the veterans to climb the wall was by doing it ourselves. Even some of the students were a little scared to climb the wall, but it was good for the veterans to see them climbing the wall because it showed they were willing to take a chance if the veterans did as well. In a way, we were starting to build a little relationship with the veterans."

Self-Awareness

A majority of the student reflections indicated an understanding of the need for well-designed programs to meet the needs of younger veterans with post-traumatic stress disorders and substance abuse. In addition to reading about the statistics of the need in the literature, the service learning experience provided the students with a personal experience with a veteran who had such a need. The service learning experience provided a valuable values clarification experience for the students to know themselves better.

Self-awareness about future work. Some students indicated that this experience changed their idea about the population that they would like to work with after graduation. One stated, "I thought this was a good experience and it is something I would consider

doing for my job because I think I would work very well with this population.” Others expressed more self-awareness of the modalities that they prefer, stating, “I learned that I prefer physical and outdoor leisure activities. It was good to be able to see leisure education being implemented in person. We have learned about it but it is more believable for me when I see it happening and was able to see quick results at the end of the session.”

Self-awareness of improved confidence. Many of the students suggested that the service learning experience improved their confidence for practice. After the experience of working with “real” people rather than practicing on classmates, they felt more confident in their abilities. One student shared, “I can confidently say that I am prepared to work with a variety of people.”

Self-awareness of stereotyping. A fairly prominent theme involved students’ reflections that they had preconceived notions of what a veteran or someone with a behavioral health issue might be like. As the students worked in person with the veterans, their wrong assumptions were shattered. Students were surprised by the veterans’ athleticism, their willingness to participate, and their lack of “difference.” Several students wrote almost the same words, stating, “They are just like anyone else.” The practical experience served to shatter stereotypes of veterans or persons with behavioral health issues as a whole.

In summary, the findings indicated three emergent themes: 1) the classroom preparation improving the service learning experience, 2) the service learning experience improving an understanding of the TR process, and 3) the improvement in self-awareness as a result of service learning. The students’ reflections on the experience with the veterans showed clear outcomes from the process which express the students’ voice on the matter of service learning.

Limitations

The limitations of this study involve the nature of written reflection assignment used for data collection. The fact that the student reflection was required and graded may impact the student answers. Since they were being graded, students may have been more prone to positive reflections. On the other hand, the assignment specifically asked for ways to improve the service-learning experience.

Second, this study required a reflection paper about the experience at the end of the semester. Perhaps requiring a reflection immediately following the experience would have garnered more “raw” or possibly “truer” results.

Another limitation involves the lack of information about the perceptions of the students who did not consent by sharing their reflections for the research process. These students potentially could have provided a different perspective than those of students who were willing to participate in research.

Discussion

This study observes students’ perceptions about the service-learning experience while they were enrolled in a senior level college course, *Therapeutic Recreation Interventions*. Over half of the students in the course consented to participating in the study. The data analysis yielded three distinct student perspective themes. First, classroom learning and participation enhanced the service learning experience. Second, therapeutic recreation students gained an improved understanding of the standards of therapeutic recreation practice, particularly the therapeutic recreation process. Third, the service learning

experience promoted awareness of self in terms of attitudes, stereotypes, self-efficacy, and chosen career path. These three themes support the literature related to service learning. This study took a different approach, seeking to observe students' subjective perceptions related to learning in an authentic environment.

As educators, the researchers believe that service-learning experiences are among the most valuable to our students. We recognize the potential for meeting student outcomes related to skill development, application of practice principles, and improved overall performance in their major coursework. It is important to discern the reality of this belief. To some degree, perception is reality. Certainly, it is the reality of the one who perceives it. Therefore, one could surmise that if a student perceives that he is not "getting anything out of" a particular teaching strategy or learning opportunity, then he will get nothing out of the experience! Gary Zukav (2001), spiritual teacher and author, stated, "What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends on what we look for. What we look for depends upon what we think" (p. 310). It is out of this idea that the study was born.

The results of this study indicate that our beliefs about service-learning are true. Students' perceptions about their experience were resoundingly positive. As the literature suggests, service learning improved students' understanding of classroom materials. Students had a much clearer perspective on the delivery of the therapeutic recreation treatment modality, leisure education, as well as better comprehension about the planning and implementation aspects of the therapeutic recreation process. Students' self-efficacy was also greatly enhanced, as also suggested by the literature. The students experienced personal growth as well, as indicated by their ability to identify prior prejudices and stereotypes. In addition, for many the experience affirmed their career choice. All of this provides evidence that, from the students' perspectives, service learning has a tremendously positive impact on their learning and on the educational experience, much more so than does traditional classroom instruction and coursework. In addition, beyond preparing the students for a career in therapeutic recreation, this service learning opportunity taught students to be good citizens. Their ideas and prejudices about addiction and veterans' experiences were challenged and changed. Students felt good about their involvement and voiced the desire to participate in similar programs in the future.

Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that further analysis of student perceptions about service learning is needed. In an effort to study student perceptions in a more in-depth fashion, future similar research could require students to write a paper about their perceptions of service learning at the beginning of the semester and then again after having completed the service learning experience. If, as Zukav (2001) suggests, "what we believe is based upon our perceptions," it would follow that students who perceive service learning in a negative light would likely have a negative experience, which would be reflected in their final paper. On the other hand, if these same students had a positive service learning experience, we would expect that their perceptions would match those of the students in the current study. It would be interesting to observe whether or not perceptions changed between before and after the service learning opportunity. Further, the pre-experience perception paper would provide a baseline for the researchers by which to measure change in perception. Observations in this light would be interesting as well.

Another opportunity for similar future research would be to require a reflection paper about the experience immediately following the experience, rather than at the end of the

semester as was the case in the current study. This might garner more “raw” or possibly “truer” results.

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