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ABSTRACT

This article explores a course-linked service-learning project that facilitated social-problem focused dialogues between students and men who were incarcerated in a prison. Student reflections were life-changing; listening with both their hearts and minds enhanced student learning, increasing empathy, fueling a sense of advocacy, and fostering a plan for action and change. Conversing with the men challenged old assumptions and invited students to solidify goals and infuse their career paths with civic values and social justice concerns.

Keywords: community engaged learning, forensic social work, prison, civic values

CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE: THE IMPACT OF SERVICE-LEARNING DIALOGUES WITH INCARCERATED MEN ON SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

Social work educators are tasked with preparing the next generation of professionals to enhance the lives of individuals, facilitate therapeutic groups, advocate for vulnerable populations, and contribute to a better society. As a result, these students must learn many essential social work skills. Developing creative teaching strategies to embed the necessary knowledge and skills is critical to the transformation of the student into a skilled professional. Service learning linked with community engagement offers an invaluable approach to fulfilling this goal. Service learning is experiential education to address needs while using reflection to reach learning outcomes (Jacoby, 1996). Donahue and Plaxton-Moore (2018) describe community engagement as "a course-based experience that cultivates academic and civic knowledge and skills, as well as values and commitments through direct engagement with communities and groups working to overcome systemic injustice" (p. 3).

Research on service learning demonstrates that this experience has numerous benefits to students, recipients, and community partners. Effective service learning should include partnerships, reciprocity, and reflection (Jacoby, 2015). Service learning is a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008; Anderson, Boyd, Marin, & McNamara, 2019) "that helps students develop skills and knowledge essential for success in work, life and citizenship" (Brown, McNair, & Albertine, 2012, p. 4). Service learning as a high-impact practice helps increase students' awareness of problems (Blewitt, Parsons, & Shane, 2018); helps increase their empathy towards individuals experiencing these issues (Denney & Goulette, 2019); enhances student communication skills, critical thinking, and problem solving (Wagers, Pate, Turmel, & Burke, 2018); and develops a sense of moral responsibility to solve and address issues of concern (Blewitt et al., 2018).

BENEFITS

Service-learning projects take education beyond the classroom into practical settings where students can apply their knowledge, use their skills, and truly grow and change from the experience. Research indicates that service-learning projects can provide transformative experiences for the students (Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Gredley, 2015; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Roberts, Sellers, Franks, & Nelson, 2018).

Social work students must seek to understand the experience and feelings of their clients. Truly being able to empathize with an individual is a core foundation to establishing successful therapeutic relationships. Growth in empathy and compassion for the human condition are a frequent outcome from service-learning projects (Gredley, 2015; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Raikes & Balen, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Service learning provides students opportunities to work with underserved populations, better understand their struggles, and learn to care (Collica-Cox, 2020; Davis, 2015). The student's ability to see a person for who they are and what their struggles are, not what they have done, is especially important when attempting to establish rapport and facilitate change in the criminal justice system.

The social work value of social justice is especially apparent in the forensic settings when working with vulnerable populations. Social work educators are urged to provide opportunities to link social work curriculum and values with actual opportunities in the community to help the student internalize the profession's commitment to social justice and human rights (Robinson, 2018; Rozas & Garren, 2016). Service-learning opportunities embedded with social justice values result in an enhanced appreciation of the struggles faced by vulnerable groups and issues of power and inequality (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe, & Song, 2016; Raikes &

Balen, 2016). Mitchell (2007, 2015) indicates that critical service learning makes deeper connections for students, where they not only gain knowledge, competence, and values clarification, but also become change agents. Myers, Myers, and Peters (2019) longitudinal study supports that these high-impact practices can create pro-civic attitudes and engagement that continues later in life.

Strategies to increase students' sense of confidence and abilities are rampant in the social work field, including activities like role-plays, group projects, and field placements. Service learning provides another avenue to enhance a student's professional competence (Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Lennon-Dearing, 2015; Long & Utley, 2018; Lowe & Nisbett, 2013; Miller et al., 2019; Mink & Twill, 2012; Owen, Babinski, & Rabiner, 2019). Essential social work skills of active listening and advocacy can be developed by the creation of community engaged service-learning projects (Collica-Cox, 2020; Langellier, Astramovich, & Doughty Horn, 2020).

In addition to their capabilities, social workers must be able to engage in self-assessment and evaluation. Service learning's essential element of critical reflection facilitates growth in this area (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Service-learning projects enhance a student's self-awareness and analysis (Gredley, 2015; Lowe & Nisbett, 2013; Petracchi et al., 2016; Wilson, 2011). A student's reflection on their values and ethics enhances their growth as a caring, helpful professional who is prepared and ready to address societal challenges and injustices (Chooi Lim & Babar, 2016; Clancy & Bauer, 2018). Critical self-reflection is important in teaching social justice (Jacoby, 2015). Therefore, working with community partners who offer opportunities to work with diverse groups is another essential component of service learning.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

This Prison-University partnership provides opportunities that the University would otherwise not have. In addition to the students' learning benefits, this collaboration offers benefits to the community partner as well. The free, valuable service that the students provide offers potential new ideas and programming for the treatment staff to consider. Networking and positive connections with the community also occur. Finally, for the men who are incarcerated, they have an opportunity to serve as educators and experts, providing knowledge to students while enhancing their own self-efficacy and self-esteem.

For those who go to prison, the experience can have devastating, long-lasting consequences. Although most will return to their communities, this will not be without loss: loss of jobs, status, resources, and relationships. The stigma of incarceration oftentimes remains years after the event. Goffman (1963) made it clear that stigma was a "deeply discrediting attribute," which could only occur within the "language of relationships" (p.3). Simply stated, stigma is contingent on one's social context, rather than being a matter of any specific attribute. In our contemporary culture, incarceration often means that the label of 'ex-felon' will ensure stigmatization is permanent.

Partnerships between universities and prisons facilitate growth for those who are involved. Research has demonstrated that de-stigmatization can occur under the right circumstances. Removing negative labels can be a powerful way to neutralize stigma, and research demonstrates that students can play an important role in this. A good example is research results from instructor training for The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program®. This is an organization that brings "outside" college students into prison, joining incarcerated men and women who become "inside students" for an undergraduate course (Conti, Morrison, & Pantaleo, 2013). Here, incarcerated people were called "inside students" rather than inmates, and the college students were called "outside students." This suspension of institutional labels was an important first step in the de-stigmatization process. During the encounters between the two groups, a safe space was created where "negative labels are set aside and civility is reestablished" (Conti et al., p.164). It is through a new language of relationships, which must first be demonstrated by the group leaders, that normalization of the stigmatized individual occurs (Conti et al., p.168). Although each service-learning dialogue is offered as a single session, compared to the semester-long collaboration of the Inside-Out program, there are still common threads: both programs provide a safe space to respectfully restore civility through discussion and nonjudgmental sharing, in the hope of seeing beyond stigma and labels.

THE COURSE

Forensic Social Work is an upper-level social work elective course. Forensic social work applies social work practice skills to individuals involved with the criminal justice system (National Organization of Forensic Social Work, n.d.). Virtually all forensic social work practitioners will work with individuals who were victims of crime or accused of committing a crime. This course spanned the entire fall semester (15 weeks) and met for a 50-minute period three times per week. Course content included information on civil and criminal law, policies, assessment, and treatment strategies when working with clients involved in the legal system. Forensic professionals came to the classroom as guest lecturers and discussed a variety of topics in areas such as child welfare, interpersonal violence, and prison treatment. The semester long project focused

on helping students apply their learning to problems faced by individuals impacted by the criminal justice system. The objectives for the service-learning project included: exploration of an identified problem faced by those who are incarcerated (active listening and empathy), development of strategies to address these issues (critical thinking), personal growth (self-awareness both personally and professionally), and identification of future steps (goals and aspirations). Thirty students were enrolled in the course; each student chose to participate in one of six different pre-arranged service opportunities. This paper will focus on three of these service-learning projects which comprise the larger category of Service-Learning Dialogues with Incarcerated Men. The community partner (a prison) assisted in the generation of these projects by identifying three relevant and common issues these men struggle with: Substance Abuse, Mental Health and Recidivism. The students in each group developed a list of 10 relevant questions they researched and believed were related to these issues. These questions were sent to the prison treatment staff for pre-approval.

The Dialogues

In order to recruit participants, the prison treatment staff explained the project to unit team leaders and staff in the Therapeutic Community. Selection for participation in the service-learning dialogues was based upon those whose backgrounds matched the pre-selected monthly topics. Unlike focus groups, a research method to collect data on a person or issue, these service-learning dialogues were an experiential learning opportunity to enhance students' skills and learning. For example, if someone had a history of substance abuse treatment and that topic was going to be discussed, the individual would be deemed suitable for that particular group and invited to participate. It was also crucial that those who were selected expressed their own level of interest and strong motivation to be involved in the dialogues. Once this process was underway, names of interested participants were forwarded to the treatment staff who then scheduled an informal meeting with them in order to discuss the specifics of this project. At this informal meeting, the men were invited to review and discuss the topics suggested for discussion, to ask questions, and to comment on the student-developed questions. The men were invited to reject any questions they deemed to be too personal or inappropriate. If they later changed their minds about the group, they were told they could opt out of participation. All those invited to participate accepted the invitation without hesitation.

Power dynamics were identified early on. For example, concern for student comfort was expressed during one exchange with the staff. Near the end of the informal meeting, the treatment staff member asked the men how they would like the chairs to be arranged for the dialogues. Several older men insisted that they thought it would be best if the students were asked what seating arrangements they would be most comfortable with. At this early phase, the reason for this was not clear. On the surface, it seemed polite and something a host would do for a guest. However, it could also belie apprehension by the incarcerated participants of potential judgment and fear toward them by the unknown students who were from the University and in a position of privilege. Allowing the students to initiate distance would mitigate any perceived rejection by them. This would follow other research that noted guarded optimism and anxiety on the part of both the incarcerated participants and the students (McAninich & Narvich, 1992).

Each month (September, October, and November), one group of six students, along with the faculty member, went to the state prison to meet with the incarcerated men, ask questions, hear their experiences, and facilitate

a discussion. About six to eight incarcerated men attended these dialogues each month and each discussion lasted for an hour and a half. The students previously decided how they would facilitate the dialogues. For 1-½ hours, the students and men talked about these issues of concern. Ultimately, students had to complete critical reflection about this experience, gaining a better understanding of both themselves and the men, while developing potential solutions, suggestions, and objectives (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

REFLECTION

Students had multiple opportunities for reflection in this course. Narrative reflection enhances the growth in service learning (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Immediately following the dialogues, students, faculty and the prison treatment staff met to share their feelings and insights. Themes that were consistently communicated by student participants included normalization of the incarcerated men as being just regular people, how respectful the men were, and how the struggles expressed by the men seemed to be in need of innovative solutions. Students were also required to complete a final written reflection from the experience, addressing civic knowledge, skills, values, and civic motivation. The written reflection followed prompts in the form of questions. Civic knowledge included questions about how course content was applied and what they learned. Civic skills asked about personal growth, such as their skills working with this population and any new assumptions they came away with. Civic values explored their personal values and any desire for personal change. Finally, civic motivation explored the students' sense of responsibility for working with this population and any influences on their future career paths. Additionally, students had to complete a service paper that

summarized their service, explored their social problem and contributing factors, ideas for future collaborations, and self-assessment. The self-assessment delved deeper into the skills they utilized and how the experience will help them to help others in the future. Content of student written reflections were reviewed for identified themes and potential future collaborations and solutions. Student reflections demonstrated that their learning and social work skills were greatly enhanced by this experience.

Reflection/Outcomes
Substance Abuse

Students who completed the dialogue focused on substance abuse were significantly impacted by the way the men opened up, expressed their emotions, and honestly shared the difficulties and struggles they've encountered with addiction. Students were particularly struck by the men's motivation and desire to change their "personal habits." Students suggested that the University's MSW program might be helpful in supplementing current program resources by providing forensic social work interns to address rising clinical needs. Lastly, a collaboration between the University and the prison was suggested in order to write a grant to secure funding for additional substance abuse treatment resources.

One of the most valuable outcomes was the impact on the students. They stated, "Being able to meet with the incarcerated men really gave us motivation to continue our education so that someday we can professionally and compassionately advocate for those in need." Another stated, "This was life-changing to me. I always knew I wanted to focus on drug and alcohol, but having the chance to have a conversation with inmates really opened my mind and my heart towards the prison population, helping me determine exactly where I want to be." The students re-

flected on the compassion, empathy, and increased understanding they gained from this experience.

Mental Health

Students who completed the dialogue on mental health noted the willingness and desire of men to participate in current group offerings, even as they desired a wider selection of topics. The students suggested creating a partnership between the prison and the University, in order to collaborate on innovative new groups such as animal-assisted intervention and music therapy. Again, the general consensus was that the University's MSW program, with a concentration in clinical social work, would be a considerable resource in addressing the burgeoning mental health needs of those who are incarcerated.

The students were able to truly listen and hear the men's stories and needs. One student stated, "I always talk about wanting to work in the prison, but now I am thinking about what can be done to help these men and how I can facilitate change based on their needs." Another said, "This experience opened my eyes to problems they face on a daily basis and what could be improved with better support." Again, the role of advocacy came through as they said, "I want to help the community I am working with and be motivated to change the things that need to be changed."

Recidivism

Students who completed the dialogue on recidivism were struck by how they heard "over and over how drug use was a major contributor leading them back to prison as well as unhealthy coping and poor support systems." Many men expressed a desire to obtain marketable skills, certifications, and job training, but were frustrated that competitive vocational education frequently meant having to transfer to another facility, sometimes far from family and loved ones. Students understood the issue of recidivism as being a combination of limited resources despite there being an ever-increasing, desperate demand for effective reentry services. In light of this quandary, students offered a "short term" solution: adding more intense peer mentoring prior to release and continuing for months/years after release. The mentors can offer support and guidance to help the individual stay on track.

The students also proposed long-term remedies and indicated their long-term interest in rehabilitation efforts. One stated, "I want to write policies one day that will help them to have the skills and tools they need." Another said, "Coping skills, support systems, and addiction services are all necessary for an individual to thrive outside of the prison. I am grateful for this experience as it has led me to get a grip on what I want to do after I graduate and, hopefully, how I can help as well."

CONCLUSION

As indicated from the critical reflection, this service-learning experience was truly transformational for these students. As similar research has suggested, these students gained compassion and empathy from hearing the personal stories and insights from the men (Gredley, 2015; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Raikes & Balen, 2016; Wilson, 2011). It enhanced their understanding and appreciation of an often forgotten, overlooked population. The students were motivated by this experience and reported that it fueled their desire for helping this vulnerable population (Cotton & Thompson, 2017; Gredley, 2015; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Roberts, Sellers, Franks, & Nelson, 2018). This experience reinforced the core values of social work. In addition to the student benefits, it was an extremely rewarding class for the faculty to witness the growth and change in students. Finally, the men contributed to the growth and development of the

next generation of social workers…and for that we thank them immensely.

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