

January 2002

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Recommended Citation

Behrman, Carolyn, "Students in the Field: Linking Service-Learning and Undergraduate Research" (2002).

Anthropology and Classical Studies Faculty Research. 526.

http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/anthro_ideas/526

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Students in the Field: Linking Service-Learning and Undergraduate Research

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Introduction

Most of the papers in this volume focus their attention on research conducted on service-learning in an effort to assess or to improve the effectiveness of this educational practice. In this essay I am going to describe the development and piloting of a course that sought not to conduct research on service-learning but to use service-learning to teach research methods for undergraduates. The course, entitled *Qualitative Methods for Anthropological Research*, was designed to enhance the links between community and university by offering students actual experience applying skills from the classroom to concerns defined by community-based agencies. The primary goals of the course, which will be discussed in detail below, were skills acquisition, skills application and recognition on the part of the students of their potential as agents of change in the community. This description of the course highlights one of the most important strengths of service-learning which is its ability to make learning experiential by bringing students into an active/inquiring orientation rather than the passive/receptive model encouraged in more traditional education. There are many topics vital to the development and implementation of service-learning courses in university settings that are touched upon but not developed in detail in the pages that follow. They range from issues of teaching citizenship and the relationship between group reflection and civic engagement to university and department support for the career development of faculty, particularly junior faculty involved in service-learning pedagogy. In the context of this volume, this course description serves the more limited role of an example of service-learning from inception through application for readers focused on the further development and assessment of service-learning.

Development

Qualitative research methods strain to be applied. Ethnographic field notes, surveys, open-ended interviews, focus groups, free-lists, pile sorts and multidimensional scaling can make for very dry classroom-based learning. Classroom

exercises offer can students the chance to apply the instruments and develop skill in their use. However these exercises only expose students to the functions of qualitative research methods and not to the processes (planning, implementation and report production), negotiations, compromises and contingencies of actual research activities. For these purposes, there is functional match between qualitative research methods and service-learning.

Qualitative Methods for Anthropological Research was offered for the first time in the spring semester of 2001 to advanced undergraduates at The University of Akron who had fulfilled prerequisites in the social sciences. Development and preparation began nearly a year before the course was piloted with a grant funded by the University of Akron's Summer Teaching Grant Program. The goals developed for the course were: 1) for the students to acquire skills with a specific set of qualitative research instruments; 2) for students to work in teams and with the instructor to frame research projects and apply those instruments in order to produce written reports on particular concerns generated by cooperating community-based non-profit agencies; and 3) for students, through this work, to develop a recognition of their own potential for "meaningful community engagement" (Zlotkowski, 2001:9) and sense of effectiveness as community-based public problem-solvers.

The course plan was broken into three segments. The first segment of approximately six weeks was to be classroom-based. During this segment students would be introduced to the course material including a careful examination of the relationship between theory and method in social science research, issues in research design, the relationship between qualitative and quantitative data, and the data gathering and data analysis instruments selected for the course. These reading- and classroom-intensive weeks were to be followed by five weeks spent conducting research projects at sites in the community. The final segment of the class was designated for the production of research reports and for reflection on and evaluation of the service-learning process.¹

¹The syllabus and other course materials will be available for the spring 2002 semester at www.uakron.edu/csaa.

Having established the goals and a rough structure for the course, the process of identifying and assembling the specific teaching materials began. This process included locating and establishing working relationships with appropriate community-based, non-profit agencies who were willing to collaborate with the student researchers. Initial contact was made in the summer of 2000 with the following agencies: the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank, Planned Parenthood of Summit County, The Summit County Historical Society, the Center for Child Development at The University of Akron, Project Connect of Info Line, Summit County Metro Parks, the Native American Cultural Center, the Akron Area Emergency Task Force, HMLife Opportunity Services, and several small faith-based soup-kitchens. In many cases tentative research project topics were formulated. A deliberate effort was made not to 'over-plan' the research questions so that students would have to opportunity to participate in that process. A larger number of agencies were contacted in this initial stage than were involved in the course. Several agencies could not accommodate the tight time frame imposed by the semester schedule or had a shift in priorities or needs between initial contact and the beginning of the course. It was felt at the time that a broad range of options was important so that students could select agencies and projects to which they might develop a sense of dedication and commitment. Students were expected to work with partners or in groups of three. Given the projected size of the class, the need for six to eight effective field sites was anticipated.

Course planning required a careful consideration of the resources available to both instructor and students at the University of Akron. Beginning with a broad view, it is worth noting that students at this large, open-enrollment university do not have uniform backgrounds and tend to have very complex personal schedules. All but two of the students in the class were employed working at least 20 hours per week. Students were required to compromise their normal routines in many ways to accommodate the expectation that they be available for large blocks of time during business hours during the middle segment of the class. University resources had to be mustered to make sure that students had access to the tape recorders, transportation, supplies, computers and analytic software and other physical resources required for conducting the various projects. In this vein, very supportive academic and audio-visual departments were key to success.

Application

The first segment of the class began in January 2001. The goals of the course enumerated above were discussed in detail along with the enterprise

of service-learning and the concept of participatory action research. One student rephrased the course agenda as follows, "So, we're going to learn about some tools, conduct some research using the skills, produce useful reports and maybe get into the causes we choose." (CW, original emphasis). Initial student response to the course plan varied from high enthusiasm (including the student who began planning her research the semester before the course started) to a fairly wary reserve. Two students chose not to take the course leaving a class of sixteen. Given the opportunity both in discussion and in written form, none of the remaining students voiced anxiety or objection to the unusual structure or time demands the course imposed.

As mentioned earlier, an emphasis was placed on understanding the relationship between methods and theory in qualitative research. Lecture presentations, readings, and discussions introduced students to research design issues, sampling and specific data collection methods (systematic observation, questionnaires and surveys, a variety of scales, structured and semi-structured and open-ended interviewing, focus groups, free-lists and pile sorts). Small exercises were conducted to expose students to the methods and to working together. Students undertook short field studies observing the behavior of people in public spaces in locations such as the public library, a local shopping mall, and an airport. This exercise allowed us to explore systematic observation and practice of taking field notes. Attention was focused on the distinction between objective description and more subjective commentary. By recording both but separating them into 'observations' and 'comments' on the pages of their notebooks, students were able to enter into an ongoing discussion on the value of different sorts of observation and students began the process of understanding the importance of reflection for the learner in the field.

Other class-based activities included testing the methods of free-listing, pile sorts and multidimensional scaling (MDS) on ideas about health and smoking among college students. The class became a research team with two group leaders who oversaw the process of interviewing students outside the classroom who were either smokers or non-smokers. The research team asked their interviewees to list reasons people smoke and to list responses to the question "What does it mean to be healthy?" These listed responses were then sorted by interviewees and graphed through the process of multidimensional scaling.² The team assumed that smokers would share an understanding about issues like what health is and why people smoke and that that understanding would differ from non-smokers. The MDS combines the views that a group of people defined by a researcher have and displays them graphically. By comparing the MDS

²The multidimensional scaling analysis was conducted using Anthropac X from Analytic Technologies.

for smokers and non-smokers on the question of why people smoke they observed that, for their sample, smokers were in stronger agreement than non-smokers in their overall view of why people smoke and smokers tended to separate intrinsic factors like low-self esteem and addiction from external factors such as stress. This research was literally conducted in the hallways and then analyzed on the classroom floor but it gave the students the chance to test drive the methods and the analytic software. At the end of the first segment of the course a skills assessment test was administered.

The second segment of the course began with students being introduced to the available field sites and nascent research topics. Students faced the complicated job of choosing their sites on the basis of several sometimes competing criteria: interest in specific topics, interest in particular methods, ability to meet the expectations of the sites in terms of skills and of time schedules and their sense of the potential for the site and topic to yield a successful project. In cases where research would be conducted under the authority of the University of Akron rather than the community-based agency, the students had to work with the instructor to apply for and acquire human subjects approval from the university's Institutional Review Board before research could commence. During this segment students scheduled their own hours with the agencies and met in small groups alone and with the instructor. Students chose to work in groups of three to four, slightly larger than expected. They selected projects with five of the available community partners including one which was initiated by a student who learned about the course during the fall semester, had an appropriate community contact and came up with a workable plan.

Following a brief description of each of the qualitative research projects undertaken by the students and some quotations from student field notes, I will explain the third segment of the course and discuss the degree to which this pilot rendition of the course met the objectives planned during its development.

Three students (GC, JS and DB) worked with a campus-based child care center interested in learning more about the need for evening child care among its primarily university affiliated clientele. The supervisor from the child development center framed the original question but then took a very supportive stance allowing the students to spearhead the project. She reviewed their surveys and helped them find participants for their study. This group of students completed human subjects approval, conducted two focus groups with university students who have children and developed a short survey and interviewed a sample of students with children, half of whom took evening classes and half of whom did not. Acquiring human sub-

jects approval and designing the project used the bulk of the time available to these researchers. The conducted their survey and one student chose to complete the focus groups after the semester ended. Their findings revealed a surprising lack of awareness about the campus-based child care center's current services. They found that student-parents were pursuing a wide range of care strategies. They also found what they characterized as "a general level of dissatisfaction" from the student-parents with their current child care arrangements.

Four students (KC, AH, PN and RS) worked with the local 'information and referral service,' an umbrella organization that houses a variety of projects designed to disseminate information to individuals and families in need of support services and assist the community-based agencies that deliver those services. The student researchers worked on an assessment survey for a project designed to assist non-profit agencies of all sizes from the community with access to and use of the internet and selected computer applications geared toward networking. The primary goals and specific research plan for the study were developed prior to the students' involvement. However, the study director had the students revise an older version of the interview to be used. Students assisted with the dissemination of surveys, learned to use the database and entered returned surveys. They were given a subset of completed interviews to analyze. The surveys explored the computer resources and needs of a wide range of community-based non-profits. The supervisor chose to establish four domains of interest and asked each student to focus their analysis on one of the four domains: business environment, support system, training of personnel and connectivity. Their findings were more detailed than can be explained briefly here but by and large the student's reports support the current emphases of the project.

Two students (DB and CW) worked with the Summit County Historical Society looking at one of its educational outreach programs. The students met with the supervisor and framed a set of questions centered around the impact and utilization of the Historical Society's traveling educational program for third and four graders. They developed questionnaires for students and for their teachers, observed the program and administered their questionnaires. They planned an exercise using free-listing and pile sorts which time did not permit them to carry out. These students came up with a detailed list suggested changes for the program based on the questionnaires and on their observations.

Four students (PF, MJ, EM and LC) worked with the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank assisting with a survey funded by Second Harvest to learn more about the clients of emergency food services. These students were trained in formal interview techniques at the Foodbank. They went

in teams to emergency food distribution sites, participated in determining the sample to be interviewed and conducted interviews. Because the analysis of this large scale survey was to be carried out by an outside agency, the students were given copies of a sample of interviews from the pool to analyze on their own. Their analysis was biased in favor of men and so their analysis focused on describing the male client population and examining residential patterns, access to transportation and types of employment by such factors as race and age. A fifth student (CH) with a degree in dietetics developed a separate plan with the supervisor at the Foodbank and conducted 24-hour dietary recalls with a sample of the clients being interviewed in order to analyze some of the general trends in diet for this populations.

Finally, two students (CT and MD) worked on a study of knowledge of reproductive health issues and access to reproductive health services among young women in group foster care settings. This project was proposed in the semester before the course began by a student planning to take the class. She is an emergency medical technician and also a volunteer at a group foster home. She obtained the permission of the home supervisor to conduct the study. She and a classmate sought human subjects approval from the university, devised a set of open-ended interviews and a free-list and pile sorts exercise addressing the knowledge, attitudes, practices and access issues to information about reproductive health faced by young teenaged girls.

Field notes were kept on all activities. Students found that “the observations were useful when it came time to create our presentation and write up reports but the comments section was a good way to get the issues and feelings out that are just going to happen on projects like this.” (MJ) A few examples of comments from the students’ notes follow.

First Impressions

[The other students] and I met immediately after the meeting [with the agency supervisor]... We felt like we were off to a good start – like we know what we are doing. (JS)

Although [the site supervisor] provided the purpose of the study, she did not sound very convincing when she said “It’s your project/this is your study.” This was misleading. Her control and authority over the project is obvious and strong. But I hope she will provide us with enough latitude to conduct the study well. (GC)

We started with a tour of the place...The least I can say is that this tour literally blew me away, concerning the complexity and size of this whole operation...This was an eye-opener for me. I didn’t realize that hunger in this country was such an enormous issue. This bothers me and challenges

me to gather more information. (PF)

The Working Process

We met with [the site supervisor] who asked us to create a questionnaire and a research plan based on the description of the program and the issues she raised. We have to figure out who to ask and what to ask to answer the big questions of how to improve the outreach program. (DB)

[Another student] had been trying to reach [the site supervisor]. [That student] brought us all copies of the new survey. Some of the changes we had suggested were incorporated. [The site supervisor] emailed all of us to say we should come in to prepare the mailing. She was very happy to see us. Stuffing envelopes went smoothly. (RS)

I arrived when I said I would but there was no one there and no message left for me so I just sat down and started entering one of the surveys. It was kind of frustrating to realize that I was not really important to the main goals of the place. (AH)

We all shared our proposed research plans and our lists of topics for the focus group. We merged the plans into one pretty good one and we merged the topics lists discarding what we felt was repetitious or irrelevant and retaining items that tapped into useful information given the primary goal of the study. We debated over [several items], scrutinizing them for relevance, flow and continuity with other items. (GC)

Over the course of the interview I realized that some of our questions and categories were not quite right. The financial scale starts too low and each level is too broad. The work question needs to be reworded so they can not just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ (DB)

Field Note Data

The interview includes questions about the person’s ability to support their children financially. [This interviewee] became somewhat defensive. Several questions pursue this line. As I began this line of questioning, [the interviewee] instantaneously brindled. [The interviewee] said, “You can just mark ‘no’ for all of those. I’m not that poor.” Despite the fact that I know I am supposed to as all of the questions exactly as they are worded for reliability, I did as asked. I could tell that the questions had offended and I did not want to irritate further. (MJ)

The clientele were mainly homeless individuals according to the director who met us. There were four of us there to do the interviews. I was not involved in determining the sample this time. Before the meal and our chance to start [interviews] there was a short religious service. Everyone went in to attend but I did not hear anyone say that a meal was contingent upon this however. It was just part of the process of the evening. (PF)

As I was typing in the transcript of the focus group, I realized that there was real difference between what the men thought was important and what the women did. (DB)

In the final segment of the class we returned to the formal classroom schedule. In the remaining weeks of the semester students worked in groups to create presentations about their field work experience for the class. The goal of the assignment was to inform the class about the issue that the project addressed. Working in groups and creating these presentations as a group gave students time to reflect and also to orient others verbally and through pictures, quotations from fieldnotes and PowerPoint to the locus and context of research. It also gave students the chance to reflect privately and then publically as a group on the research process and its significance for them as researchers, for the agency and for the larger issue at hand. A second skills assessment test was administered which will be discussed below. Students also worked individually to produce reports that summarized their data and conveyed the findings of their studies to their community-based agencies and supervisors.

Conclusions

To wrap up discussion of the final segment of the course and thus also to wrap up this paper, it is necessary to return to the goals of the course. As explained earlier, the goals developed for the course were: 1) for the students to acquire skills with a specific set of qualitative research methods; 2) for students to work in teams and with the instructor to frame research projects and apply those methods in order to produce written reports on particular concerns generated by cooperating community-based non-profit agencies; and 3) for students, through this work, to develop a recognition of their own effectiveness as community-based public problem-solvers. I will address each of these in order.

The degree to which students have acquired a level of comfort and confidence with research methods through learning about them or using them in the classroom setting is revealed in the research process. Some students required more assistance than others, some showed proficiency by experimenting with tools, and some avoided certain methods they found difficult when they chose their projects. The initial test of skill acquisition at the end of the first segment revealed a predictable range of understanding. Testing again after the second segment should have demonstrated improvement since re-testing on the same material generally improves scores. I am pleased to note that individual student performance improved most on sections of the second test that covered methods used in their research projects.

Addressing the second goal of the course, students worked in teams and with the instructor to frame research projects. The projects applied research methods from class in order to produce written reports on particular concerns of importance to community-based non-profit agencies. Most of the students found the group work valuable but one student felt that the effort to collaborate with other students left much of the coordinating to her and that she could have devoted more time to the “real work at hand if I’d been alone...This project ...didn’t need to be a collaborative one.” (EM) From the instructor’s point of view, the course would have been more manageable with fewer projects in operation. Final reports to agencies were written individually by each student and varied in quality and detail and demonstrated in these comments from site supervisor’s evaluations.

The analysis was exactly what I asked for. (supervisor at information and referral service project)

I would have appreciated a more thorough analysis – e.g., there is a large difference between ‘employees trained’ vs. ‘informally trained’ but they were discussed as a whole...Recommendations were superficial. (supervisor at information and referral service project)

Some elements of the summarized data will definitely effect our planning. (supervisor at Historical Society)

The students made a big contribution to the research project. Their reports are interesting and may be useful. [PF]’s conclusion that some of the questions from the survey were not just annoying parents but undermining services to certain clients who might fear that answering certain questions would result on accusations of negligent parenting was very interesting indeed. I will be passing that observation along. (supervisor at the Foodbank)

The work on the focus group is not yet complete but I look forward to reading those results since this is an issue I have been very interested in gaining insight into. (supervisor at the child care center)

I am not sure yet how this information will be used but it is very valuable and I am grateful they are making the effort to document it. (supervisor at group foster home)

The final goal for the course was recognition on part of students of their own effectiveness as community-based public problem-solvers leading to further service and/or further involvement with participatory action research. The student self evaluations paint a very positive picture indicating that they felt they had been successful in producing useful information given the needs of the agencies.

Conclusions

We hope we have provided a clear description of the evolution of our research program. We begin with a commitment to the constructivist-developmental perspective, a view that characterizes human development as the product of interpersonal interactions within a social context. Furthermore, we complement this perspective by suggesting that focusing on four distinct developmental domains: CARE, COMPETENCE, COMMITMENT, AND CITIZENSHIP, contextualize service-related developmental experiences.

The findings presented here suggest that service participation contributes in some measurable way to the civic development of youth. In general, service participants showed greater concern for social problems, levels of future civic involvement, and civic attitudes relative to non-servers. These findings are consistent with the work reviewed here, as well as by Youniss and Yates (1997), Flanagan, et al. (1999), and others. Perhaps service links students to persons different from themselves. This exposure to the other helps students recognize the plight of individuals living in compromised circumstances, and helps broaden students' awareness of the importance of civic engagement and social responsibility.

It is also important to note that simply participating in service may not be enough of a catalyst for developmental growth through service. Participants need an opportunity to share their experiences with interested others. The results describing differences between students sharing or not sharing their service experiences with their parents suggests the importance at looking at how service experiences become part of youth's lives. The opportunity to make service experiences public lends value and importance to the service experience. Furthermore, discussion of service experiences allows youth to consolidate these experiences into a coherent identity and deepen social commitment and understanding. Herein lies the developmental power of service experiences.

In short, service merely provides an avenue to the development of connectedness to society and personal growth. This opportunity is enhanced by the sharing of service experiences with interested others, leading to a deeper understanding of society, self, and service to the greater good.

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