Health Matters: Service-Learning (SL) Interdisciplinary Health Fair in Nursing and Psychology Provides Student Satisfaction & Growth

Nancy Kern-Manwaring
Miami University - Middletown

Virginia B. Wickline, Ph.D.
Miami University - Middletown

Abstract

Making service-learning (S-L) work across disciplines enables students and faculty to seek out opportunities for the "best" and "most" all-inclusive opportunities for S-L in relation to teaching strategy, learning experience, philosophy, and pedagogy. Our interdisciplinary project-a health fair for elementary school children-engaged students in two different disciplines (psychology & nursing) in a joint S-L project, which allowed them to see health as broader than their specific discipline/profession. Community partners reported 100% satisfaction with the event, and a majority of students self-reported increased satisfaction, as well as personal and professional growth, because of the event.

Introduction

Service-learning (S-L) engages students in an organized service activity to meet a need identified by the community, incorporating reflection activities as a key component for student development to facilitate the connection between practice and theory, which often fosters critical thinking (Bringle & Hatcher; 1996; Seifer, 1998). In addition, Seifer (1996) stresses the importance of partnerships between communities and schools. Making service-learning (S-L) work across disciplines enables students and faculty to seek out opportunities for the "best" and "most" all-inclusive opportunities for S-L in relation to teaching strategy, learning experience, philosophy, and pedagogy. The purpose of this qualitative research (case study design) was to evaluate our very short-term S-L project: a one-day health fair for elementary school children that engaged students in two different disciplines (psychology & nursing). We hoped that this interdisciplinary approach allowed them to see health as broader than their specific discipline/profession.

Research reports of interdisciplinary S-L are extremely rare in the literature. We believe creating a multidisciplinary S-L activity such as ours can directly benefit school children and the administrators who seek to provide high quality educational opportunities for their growth, learning, and well-being, especially in the days of budget cuts that are dwindling community partners' resources for all but "essential" (or testable) educational programs. In the S-L literature, many more publications underscore the theoretical importance of S-L than provide empirical validation for the potential impacts of S-L for both students and community members. However, some studies show that S-L has myriad benefits for students, including increased self-awareness, deeper learning of course concepts, understanding differences in others, and increased civic responsibility (Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Gardner & Baron, 1999; Kolb, 1984; McKenna & Rizzo, 1999; Nokes et al., 2005).

Research on barriers that are encountered when integrating S-L instruction is also limited. Common challenges remain such as time constraints, coordination of the service component, and difficulty assessing the students' work and readiness for service (Hou, 2010). We will address in our results and discussion some of these issues. Consistent with Boyer's (1990) paradigm of leadership, not only promoting the scholarship of learning but also "celebrating" a scholarship of integrating and communicating knowledge through professional service is of utmost importance in higher education. Boyer's position that public education has a responsibility not only to the individual student but also to the community. As educators it is our responsibility to provide students with opportunities by which they can discover personal and professional connections to the issues and concerns of society.

S-L is but one kind of experiential learning highlighted in Kolb's model (1984). In creating experiential learning opportunities, critical reflection can be incorporated in the courses through assignments and activities implemented with students. By constantly challenging students to reflect within the learning environment, students begin to develop their own framework for learning and engaging in service-learning. Some may doubt that extremely short (under 8 hours) service-learning projects benefit students. However, one study incorporating a 2-hour activity where students dialogued with dying people indicated that students in the service-learning condition, when compared to controls, experienced greater social responsibility, a stronger sense of meaning, increased comfort with dying people, and increased intentions of future service (Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley,

Reber, & DuBois, 2005). In our case study methodology reviewing our short-term S-L project, we specifically expected:

1) Students would, in both satisfaction surveys and written work, demonstrate that the S-L project had positively impacted their own learning, including increased discipline-specific knowledge, personal development, and professional development. Reflective journaling (nursing) or paper (psychology) would assist the students in processing their learning and in their continual evaluation of seeing their own strengths and weaknesses.
2) Through student narratives and satisfaction surveys, as well as community partner feedback, we could identify elements of the program that constituents considered successful and where improvement of the program was needed.

Method

Participants

Undergraduates in three separate classes at a commuter campus were recruited for the project: Nursing Care of Children (*n* =12), Introduction to Psychology (n = 28), and Abnormal Psychology (*n* = 20). Our classes included 16 men (2 nursing and 14 psychology), 43 women (10 nursing and 33 psychology), and 1 transgender person (psychology). In regards to ethnicity, the available sample included 50 Caucasian Americans, 6 African Americans, and 3 students from "other" ethnic backgrounds. Miami University-Middletown is a commuter campus in a dying steel town in Southwest Ohio. According to 2000 U.S. Census (2011) statistics, Middletown is a city of 50,000 individuals –87% White, 10% Black, 3% other ethnic minorities, and 1% foreign born (3% speak something other than English at home). Our residents are 52% female. Although 77% graduated high school, only 13% hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Our campus demographics largely reflect the broader community; we usually have few non-White students in our 12-40 person classes. Like 49% of Miami Middletown students, many learners in our classes are age 23 or older. They may be working several jobs or recently unemployed and attending to aging parents, growing children, or both.

Procedure & Measures

A health fair was arranged with a local elementary school from 9 AM to 2 PM. Teachers of pre-school to fifth grade students brought their classes in groups to the school cafeteria, where groups of university students presented posters on self-selected health topics, such as the importance of exercise, healthy eating, fire safety, bike safety, bullying, divorce, and why being "different" is good. Nursing students were available throughout the fair; psychology classes stayed for 2 hours each. Each elementary class visited the fair for roughly 30 minutes, viewing a new poster about every 5 minutes, sometimes as whole classes (pre-school students) or most often in small groups of 2-5 students (elementary students).

Satisfaction surveys were completed by 9 (75%) of the nursing class, 20 (71%) of the Introduction to Psychology class, and 19 (95%) of the Abnormal Psychology class. For students, the survey included questions about student satisfaction, professional development, and critical thinking skills (see Appendix A & B for survey questions). Survey collection from community partners assessed their satisfaction with the health fair and the degree to which the community needs were met by the program (see Appendix C for survey questions). Additionally, students in the classes who participated in the event as a S-L requirement completed reflective written work about their experiences. Thus, we used a case study design incorporating both qualitative (narrative) and quantitative (survey) outcome data.

Results & Discussion

Student Growth. Evaluations of the project by both students and community partners were highly positive on all outcome measures. We heard myriad comments of satisfaction from university students, elementary students, and school officials during the event. Nursing students reported an 80-100% agreement that the service learning project significantly impacted their professional development as well as increasing their awareness of unmet community needs (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Nursing Satisfaction Survey Results**			
	Nursing Care of Children		
	M	SD	Range
Rate the impact of the service-learning experience on critical thinking skills	4.5	0.6	3-5

Rate the impact of the service-learning experience on your professional development	4.1	0.7	4-5
Rate the impact the service-learning had on your attitude of working with others outside your discipline	3.9	0.7	3-5
Rate the impact of the experience on increasing your awareness of unmet community needs	4.4	0.8	4-5
Of respondents (*N* = 12), 88% were satisfied or very satisfied (12% neutral), and 100% said they would do the event again.			

Psychology students reported 72-97% agreement of satisfaction and that the health fair increased their awareness and understanding of mental health issues in children, awareness of S-L, personal and professional development, and their ability to interact with people (see Table 2).

Table 2. **Psychology Satisfaction Survey Results**						
	Introduction to Psychology[a]			Abnormal Psychology[b]		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
Awareness of mental health issues in children	4.3	0.6	3-5	4.0	0.7	3-5
Ability/comfort to interact with people	4.3	0.9	2-5	4.0	0.8	3-5
Understanding of mental health concerns in children	4.2	0.7	4-5	4.1	0.6	3-5
Understanding of service-learning	4.6	0.6	3-5	4.4	0.5	4-5
Ability to talk to people about psychology	4.1	0.8	3-5	3.9	0.9	3-5
Personal development	4.1	0.7	3-5	4.0	0.7	3-5
Professional development	4.0	0.8	3-5	3.9	0.7	3-5
Critical thinking skills (looking at complex issues from various perspectives)	4.2	0.8	3-5	4.1	0.7	3-5
Note. [a]*n* = 20. [b]*n* = 16. Of respondents (*N* = 36), 88% were satisfied or very satisfied (12% neutral), and 100% said they would do the event again.						

All 100% of psychology students described in their narratives instances of satisfaction, personal, and professional growth (see Table 3 for examples). The outcomes of this project showcase how S-L can be done in an interdisciplinary manner to have meaningful impact on both community constituents and university students.

Program Strengths & Weaknesses. The educational staff at the school, including the school nurse as well as the teachers gave positive feedback from both the survey and written feedback (see Table 3).

Table 3. **Student Written Feedback/Comments**
"Everyone involved takes something positive away from these experiences." - student reflection
"I liked how we were made to come out of our comfort zone and participate in events we wouldn't normally do."
"I liked talking one on one with some of the kids- seemed to get a better point across when it's just us talking."
"Being able to interact with the younger children and bringing things to the level of their understanding."
"The children for the most part were eager to learn and listen to us and asked a lot of questions."
"I found it helpful to do activities with the kids rather than just talk the entire time."
"A lot of useful information was given out."

Through student narratives and satisfaction surveys, as well as community partner feedback, we could identify elements of the program that constituents considered successful as well as where improvement of the program was needed.

Table 4. **Community Partner Feedback (N = 8)**		
Rate satisfaction with program:	100% very satisfied	*"The topics were very relevant to the lives of our students". "Overall it was wonderful".*
Rate impact the program had on students:	100% very satisfied	*"My kindergarten class loved the various stations; they were actively engaged and returned to my room full of questions".*
Rate impact the program had on students:	100% very satisfied	*"We would love to have them back".*

Benefits to the faculty members involved in this collaborative project were many. Working side by side encourages faculty with the students to contribute their time, knowledge, and talents so that both learn from each other. Both faculty members expressed a re-energizing effect that the project had on their teaching, and the project connected the faculty directly to each other. The project brought both academic disciplines into focus by connecting it to "real world" contexts. Furthermore it has begun and stimulated new areas of investigative research resulting in new forms of

scholarship. S-L is not an "add-on" to your course; it is embedded *in* your course to enhance student engagement and learning. The type of outcome from these projects can lead to conference presentation and publications if run through the institutional review board.

Student benefits include a myriad of positive outcomes exhibited both in student satisfaction surveys and also in their journaling. We chose to have this project embedded in our courses to enhance the students' learning and engagement. The logistics of doing service in two disciplines can be very time consuming. Early planning and flexibility were instrumental to the success of the health fair. Coordination of a day when both groups of students had class was the first logistical step. Students' ideas and posters were approved and feedback was provided to the students before the actual day of the health fair.

A wide variety of disciplines could be incorporated into the health fair including education, other health disciplines (physical therapy, pharmacy), and future plans are even for geography. Geography was originally involved in this project and was to do GPS mapping of health care resources and show the students at the health fair where the resources are in their community.

Regarding limitations, challenges arise when working on any project of this type that incorporates service learning, first and foremost of which is the time commitment by each faculty member. Students can at first feel uncomfortable with S-L and/or feel it is an excessive demand placed on them. Giving students early notice of the S-L project, as well as individual advising and feedback prior to the event, helped ease student anxiety. The most common criticisms of the day's events were that it felt rushed (college students would like more time with each group of elementary students) and cramped (the space we were provided was very small for the number of college students we had participating). Another limitation was that we did not have institutional review board approval or parent permission to seek feedback from the elementary school students. While teacher comments indicated that the children were very happy with the event, learned a lot, and often talked about it for the next few days, future studies would benefit from having these stakeholders' specific input as well.

One other lesson we learned was that documenting the impact to both the student and community partners is very valuable. Inviting the local newspaper and press was a key component to the service. Not only was it valuable for the faculty, but we saw it as marketing for the university as well. Students were also enthused to see the outcomes in press in their local

newspaper and online media. Students were also made aware that this documentation is good for service portfolios (where applicable) and can be an advantage when applying for a job upon graduation. Listed below is a checklist that can make these academic-community partnerships successful and be of assistance when planning an interdisciplinary project.

- ✓ Flexibility of the agency you are working with- discuss time constrains of using students class time up front (schools are usually accommodating). Check if students need background checks to go into the school setting or if having faculty present is acceptable.
- ✓ Identify with the community partner what the outcomes of the S-L project should be.

- ✓ Have the project integrated into the course and introduce the project on the first day of class.
- ✓ Give time "back" to the students if the event is outside of scheduled class hours.
- ✓ Use student groups that have lab time-nursing students are easy to work with since they typically have 4-8 hours clinical days.

- ✓ Review student materials prior to the actual event so that faculty can look at appropriateness/accuracy of information or have a mock event where students role play how they will present their information.
- ✓ Review student written work/surveys after the event and keep a journal of what worked well and what areas need improvement.
- ✓ Meet with the community partner to discuss if the outcomes of the S-L project were achieved.

In conclusion, based on feedback from our constituents (faculty, college students, and school administrators), the interdisciplinary health fair seemed to be an overall success and an opportunity that provided growth and satisfaction for all involved. While interdisciplinary S-L takes a lot of planning and coordination, we believe its benefits outweigh its barriers to implementation, and we encourage others to find ways they might partner with faculty outside their primary discipline for the betterment of their communities.

Appendix A
Sample Feedback Questions – Nursing Students

1. Please rate your personal satisfaction with your service- learning experience.
   a. Very Satisfied
   b. Satisfied
   c. Neither Satisfied Nor Dissatisfied
   d. Dissatisfied
   e. Very Dissatisfied
   f. I did not participate

2. Please rate the impact of the service- learning experience on your critical thinking skills. 5= Most impact.
   Skip if you did not participate.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. Please rate the impact of the service- learning experience on your professional development. 5 = Most impact.
   Skip if you did not participate.

   1   2   3   4   5

4. Please rate the impact of the service learning experience on your feelings of working with others outside your discipline or course you are currently in. 5 = Most impact.
   Skip if you did not participate.

   1   2   3   4   5

5. Please rate the impact of the experience on increasing your awareness of unmet community needs. 5 = Most
   Impact. Skip if you did not participate.

   1   2   3   4   5

6. Please feel free to provide more feedback about this experience here.

* Identical questions will be asked about each experience. Site placements are not confirmed at this time.

Appendix B
Feedback for Psychology Students

1.) Please rate your overall satisfaction with your health/mental health fair experience.

Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied

2.) Please rate the impact of the health/mental health fair experience on your:

	1 Negative Impact	2	3 No Impact	4	5 Great Impact
Awareness of mental health issues in children					
Ability/comfort to interact with people					
Understanding of mental health concerns in children					
Understanding of service-learning					
Ability to talk to people about psychology					
Personal development					
Professional development					
Critical thinking skills (looking at complex issues from various perspectives)					
Other (please describe):					

3.) What did you <u>learn</u> from the health fair experience?

4.) What did you <u>like</u> and/or find <u>helpful</u> about the health fair experience?

5.) What did you <u>dislike</u> and/or find <u>unhelpful</u> about the health fair experience? How could it be improved?

6.) Would you consider doing an event like this again? Why and/or why not?

7.) Please feel free to provide more feedback about the experience on back.

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Autobiographical Information

Nancy Kern-Manwaring (kernma@muohio.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Nursing in the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Miami University teaching pediatric didactic as well as community and clinical courses. Her research focuses on engaging students in programs that serve the pediatric population in the Cincinnati region as well as working with the American Red Cross and provides these programs administered by her students to the community.

Virginia B. Wickline (wicklivb@muohio.edu) is an Assistant Professor of (Clinical) Psychology at Miami University. She engages students in most of her classes in a variety of service-learning programs. Recently her research foci have been on study abroad, particularly the benefits of short-term programs for student development of intercultural competency, and the benefits of service-learning, especially for increasing interpersonal and intercultural competencies and for reducing stereotypes about people with developmental disabilities.