Perspective transformation through service-learning: Student reflections

Scott Tobias
Kent State University Stark

Abstract
        This study examines whether student participation in an upper division service-learning course experienced any phases of perspective transformation. Students who participated in a service-learning project in the local community were asked to complete a total of ten reflective guided journals. Journal responses were coded using a phenomenological approach. Findings from the study indicate that participation in a service-learning project may allow students to experience specific stages of perspective transformation, though further studies are need to confirm and expand on the findings of the current study.

Introduction
        Service-learning continues to be utilized in higher education in various disciplines with outcomes noting positive student achievement (Eyler & Giles, 2001), satisfaction with college (Astin & Sax, 1998) , increased empathy (Wilson, 2011) and self-efficacy (Stewart & Allen, 2011), and increased feelings of civic mindedness (Prentice, 2011). These outcomes are found across disciplines, and provide increasing evidence that well executed service-learning courses can have a profound impact on student learning. The concept of service-learning in the social sciences continues to garner attention and, when effectively utilized, can enhance the learning of the students involved while providing valuable service to community partners (Furco, 2003).
        The process of utilizing service-learning as an effective tool in education involves consideration of several important factors including the use of student self-reflection (Gibson, Hauf, Long, & Sampson, 2011) and building community partnerships (Keith, 1998). Recent studies, such as that by Bamber & Hankin (2011) and Permaul (2009) explore how theory relates to service-learning. This aspect of service-learning is still in its formative stage, with studies utilizing theories in an attempt to more fully explain the underlying processes which occur when students undertake service-learning as part of their coursework. The purpose of this study was to explore how Mezirow's (1991) perspective transformational theory related to student experiences of service-learning in an upper division, undergraduate course.

Service-learning.

Bringle and Hatcher's (1996) research has provided a working definition of service-learning for multiple studies. This definition identifies service-learning as any course undertaken that provided students experience outside the classroom to meet demonstrated needs within their community, with a focus on reflection to foster civic responsibility as well as a more thorough understanding of the course subject (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). This places the student in the role of an active learner who must apply the knowledge they learn in a classroom setting to the service project they are undertaking, one of the defining aspects of this type of education (Munter, 2002). More recently, the partnership between the community and student learning has been explored (Deeley, 2010) with an increased focus on civic responsibility (Ponder, Vander Veldt, & Lewis-Ferrell, 2011; Prentice, 2011). Youniss and Yates (1997) argue that fostering civic responsibility and identity can be achieved through experiences which address societal problems, involve collaboration with others, and ask the learner to critically reflect on their experiences.

Reflection is necessary for student learning when utilizing a service-learning approach, with multiple papers noting its importance (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999; Eyler & Guiles, 1999; Gibson, Hauf, Long, & Sampson, 2011). Critical reflection is noted as necessary for the evaluation of decisions when one attempts, "…a new series of actions or (when we) run into difficulty in understanding a new experience" (Mezirow, 1991, p.107). By reflecting on our own beliefs in light of a new situation or challenge, one can begin a meaningful process of introspection where assumptions and prior beliefs can be examined. In a classroom setting, critical reflection by students should allow them to explore their own beliefs in a way that allows for self-examination as well as providing constructive feedback. Indeed, Bringle and Hatcher (1999) argue that guided reflection allows for instructor feedback as well as assessment.

Perspective transformation.

Service-learning may provide a setting for students to reflect on their own beliefs while simultaneously learning new knowledge. Kolb (1984), for instance, noted that experiential learning should create new knowledge for the learner as a result of transformation due to the learning experience. Building on this premise, Meziorw (1991) focuses on the underlying process of perspective transformation that individuals may undergo as new knowledge is created for the learner. The process of reflection is necessary for solving problems that are encountered and may lead to "reflective action" in which individuals make

conscious decisions based on learning that has resulted from their reflexivity (Mezirow, 1991, p. 108).

Mezirow's perspective transformation centers on how paradigm change is an active, ongoing event centered on making new meaning from disorienting experiences. This process includes ten non-linear phases including an initial disorientation as new experiences are undertaken, a cognitive reorganization of meaning based on these experiences, and a redefinition of one's role in society based on the new perspective gained via the process of perspective transformation. A complete list of the phases is listed in Table 1.

Table 1.
Mezirow's Phases of Transformation

1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions.
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are share and that others have negotiated a similar change.
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. Planning of a course of action.
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
8. Provisional trying of new roles.
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
10. A reintegration into one's own life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 168).

The process of perspective transformation is one that is not easily negotiated. Mezirow (1991) notes the process often includes unsuccessful attempts, regression to previous phases or exit out of the process entirely, and self-hindering methods of prolonging the process such as procrastination or outright failure. Thus, individuals who engage in perspective transformation are not simply incorporating new methods of thought into their everyday life. Instead, these individuals must also face the prospect of changing their behavior in light of their new perspective. This level of acumen may be difficult for those who have come to an awareness of their new perspective, but have not fully committed to it.

The outcome of this process, according to Mezirow, is an individual who is able to utilize multiple viewpoints, who can integrate new perspectives, and is more inclusive of new experiences and beliefs than one's previous perspective. This individual would then be able to act on these complex beliefs, indicating that they have successfully navigated through the process of perspective transformation on the topic at hand. This individual has taken ownership of this newly synthesized perspective through these behavioral changes.

As a result of exploring service-learning through the lens of perspective transformation, the following research questions arise:

- Do students experience any phases of perspective transformation as a result of participating in service-learning?
- If students do indicate aspects of perspective transformation, which of the stages are experienced by, as evidenced in their guided journal responses?

Methods

Participants

Participants in the current study included students taking an upper division, semester-long class focusing on Family Life Education Methodology, a concentration within the Human Development and Family Studies major. This particular course asks students to learn about researching, preparing, and executing preventative family programming in the community. Twelve students were enrolled in the class, comprised of nine females and three males. In respect to age, eleven of the twelve students were traditional college-age, while one student was a non-traditional student returning to college later in life. The majority of the students in the class where white, with one student who was African-American. All students were provided informed consent and were given the option to participate in the study at the outset of the semester. All twelve students opted to participate in the study (N=12).

Service-Learning

Family Life Education focuses on preventative programming for the community on a variety of social and societal issues (What is Family Life Education? n.d.). This approach allows for the creation of resources focused on increasing family functioning, educating the community, and providing current information to those who deal with families. The Family Life Education

Methodology course in this study undertook a semester long service-learning project, utilizing course concepts and drawing from their prior coursework in an effort to simulate how one might engage in Family Life Education as a professional in the community.

The students enrolled in the Family Life Education Methodology course partnered with a local elementary school in northeast Ohio for their service-learning experience. The school serves an economically depressed area, with 90% of those attending the school utilizing a free or reduced-price lunch option, indicating they come from families who are of low socio-economic status. The student body of the elementary school was comprised of mixed ethnic backgrounds, with the majority of students coming from white families.

Goals for the partnership included aiding teachers and administrators with assessing parental views of the school via construction of a parental survey, deploying this survey, analyzing the resulting data, and presenting the findings to the school's teachers and administrators. Visits to the school occurred throughout the semester and often occurred at times that did not coincide with regular class meetings.

Journals

Beginning in week three of the semester, students were required to complete a weekly response to a guided journal prompt over the course of the following ten weeks. Each prompt included a different aspect of the stages of perspective transformation forwarded by Mezirow (1991) such that students were being asked to reflect on their service-learning experiences through the lens of perspective transformation. Examples of these prompts included, "Do the ideas and realities presented (from the site administrators) match your own experiences at the site?" and "How would you explain your (service-learning) project and any new knowledge gained to someone without any knowledge of our field?" Students returned a total of 120 journal responses over the course of the semester. Each student kept a binder of their responses which was submitted for analysis once the semester was completed.

Analysis / Results

Journal entries were coded using a phenomenological approach as described by Daly (2007). Initial coding of the data indicated logically related general categories. Subsequent refinement of this coding led to the identification of four main response categories: role change, course material comprehension, perceptions of service-learning and the service site, and the

ability to be an agent of change in the community. These categories relate to four specific phases of perspective transformation: A disorienting dilemma; exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; and building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. Based upon these findings, both research questions were answered in the affirmative, and specific phases and their corresponding journal responses are explored below.

Disorienting Dilemma. Students identified various aspects of their experience at the service site that would be considered disorienting. One student in particular noted that during one visit to the site for an observation the situation changed upon arrival.

"In fact as September 16th rolled around I was enthusiastic about going to (the service site) to observe, but that enthusiasm shortly deflated as (sic) and a number of my fellow classmates were challenged with practically running the whole parent/child activity."

Another student identified a cognitively disorienting dilemma after administrators of the school made a presentation to the class. The tone and style of speech were differed from the way the administrators had spoken to parents during a visit to the site, and only during reflection did the reasoning for difference arise.

"In retrospect, as I look back, the (administrator's) entire introduction was completely misconstrued by us. They spoke differently to the parents because they have to. That's why we're even needed in this field…"

Other examples of disorienting dilemmas included the need to rectify preconceived notions of what the school would look like, the mindset of the families whose children attended the school, and how open parents would be to providing information about their home life for analysis during the service-learning project. The identification of multiple arenas in which disorientation was occurring suggests that students had multiple opportunities to grapple with this aspect of perspective transformation.

Role Change. The next category of responses included student sentiment that indicated either an indication that they were aware of a new role they were playing, or embracing that role through action. While these roles encompassed varying aspects of perceived responsibility, each indicated a sense of self-reflection as to their role in the project. Specific examples include statements such as,

"…we are viewed somewhat as an expert in this field."
"…it is an excellent opportunity to feel what it will be like once I am no longer a student."
         Other responses pointed out specific instances of perceived role change:
"…but even as the activity night began I think our roles changed."
"…allowed me to get a feel for how the parents and children perceived my roles."
"…my perception of the roles I am playing may not encompass each and every one".
This overt identification of awareness of roles or of specific changes in roles is identified by Mezriow (1991) as the fifth phase of perspective transformation. These changes seemed to encompass not just a self-perception of the roles that were undertaken, but also an awareness of what roles others might believe they are playing.

         Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
Students in traditional classrooms are exposed to the same material as those who may partake in service-learning. In the current study, many service-learning students identified material mastery and saliency as an outcome of the project. Many of these responses identified this increased comprehension directly.
         "…I do feel as though actually being involved with a service-learning project helped me to comprehend the material better."
         "I was able to connect what I have learned through coursework about building family strengths to facilitate learning among families (at the site). I believe that my experience with service-learning has helped me gain a better understanding of assessing outcomes from a method of data collection."
         "…learning how to do a needs assessment out of the text was taken to an entirely different level."
         Statements such as these, identifying increased material comprehension through its practical use, have been found previously in studies by Kupiec (1993) and Zlotkowski (1996). The use of a service-project provides students with the opportunity to utilize course materials in a meaningful way, thus encouraging greater mastery and ownership of the course material. This material mastery was generally paired with a sense that using the material during their career would be more easily or confidently undertaken.

Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. The final category of student responses spoke to the ability to be an agent of change in the community and larger society as a result of participating in the service-learning course. Responses tended to identify a new level of comfort with perceived new roles. Additionally, many responses noted that through building relationships within the community they would be better equipped to make a difference in their future careers. Examples of this sentiment include:

"… (the project) has enhanced my views of service-learning and made me realize how simple it can be to make a difference in the community."

"I felt proud to be able to explain that what I am doing does have a real impact on people's lives…"

"I have also become more aware that I am capable of getting my voice heard of (sic) topics that matter to the community."

"In other's views of society I am too young to make an influence, but in reality, I'm changing my community. I am influencing others to make positive changes."

The overarching theme for responses in this category echo this newly identified confidence in a role as a professional. By identifying and then gaining confidence in these perceived roles students also extended the sphere of influence they felt they possessed in the community. As a result, they also indicated a perceived increase in ability to influence change in a positive way.

Discussion

The current study presents evidence that service-learning, when used as a vehicle for student learning, can foster aspects of perspective transformation. In relation to the first research question, findings from this study provide evidence that service-learning courses, when paired with guided reflective journals, do allow students to experience phases of perspective transformation as argued by Mezirow (1991). By asking students to serve their community while simultaneously applying what they have learned in the classroom, instructors can challenge students to move beyond embedded and unexamined beliefs. This may also ask students to move beyond their own comfort zone, forcing them to engage in solving problems for which they have only minimal experience. It is through this process of self-reflection and problem solving that learners change their own perspective in order to successfully solve the problem that is present. While students in the current study seemed to be engaged in perspective transformation, without data on future action we can only

speculate that by engaging in the process students may have successfully navigated through the transformation in its entirety.

Building on these general findings, the second research question asked which of the perspective transformation phases students would engage in. Student responses from the current study identified four phases of transformation from their guided journal entries. Specifically, these four include: experiencing a disorienting dilemma; exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions; acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; and building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

Since students in this study were learning about a specific aspect of their future professional identity, phases of perspective transformation that deal with role development and exploration may have been more accessible than others. It is possible that the nature of this particular service-learning project primed students to experience these particular phases of perspective transformation. Future studies will need to explore how differing types of service-learning courses may prime students to gravitate to certain phases of perspective transformation. Perhaps service-learning, by its very nature, provides students with the opportunity to explore phases which deal with role development more easily than phases that deal with other aspects of perspective transformation. Further studies must explore if service-learning, undertaken in differing subject areas and with a wider variety of response topics, provide similar results.

Conclusion

Service-learning is a pedagogical approach to student learning which is uniquely suited to regional campus use. At the Stark campus of Kent State, students work and live in the community rather than on campus. As a result, their knowledge of community resources and needs is often well informed. By utilizing service-learning, instructors can capitalize on an existing student knowledge base while providing students the opportunity to use newly acquired skills and information in helping to solve a problem present in the local community. This opportunity fosters new connections between existing community organizations and students, many of whom will be serving their community post-graduation in these same organizations. The utilization of service-learning provides benefits to service-learning partners in the community and to students in the form of more integrative attitudes, inclusive views of community members, and nuanced views of community problems.

References

Astin, A.W., & Sax, L. J. (1998). How undergraduates are affected by service participation. *Journal of College Student Development, 39*, 251-263.

Bringle, R.G. & Hatcher, J.A. (1996). Implementing service-learning in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education, (67)*2, 221-39.

Bringle, R.G., & Hatcher, J.A. (1999). Reflection in service-learning: Making meaning of experience. *Educational Horizons, 77*(4), 179-85.

Daly, K.J. (2007). *Qualitative methods for family studies & human development.* Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Deeley, S. J. (2010). Service-learning: Thinking outside the box. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 11*, 43-53.

Eyler, J., & Giles, D. E. (2001). At a glance: What we know about the effects of service-learning on college students, faculty, institutions, and communities, 1993-2000. Retrieved 6/18/12 from Campus Compact Web site: http://www.compact.org/resources/downloads/aag.pdf

Gibson, M., Hauf, P., Long, B.S., & Sampson, G. (2011). Reflective practice in service learning: Possibilities and limitations. *Education + Training, 53*(4), 284-296.

Keith, N. Z. (1998). Community service for community building: The school-based service corps as border crossers. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, 5*, 86–96.

Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Kupiec, T. Y. (1993). Introduction. In T. Y. Kupiec (Ed.), Rethinking tradition: Integrating service with academic study on college campuses (pp. 3-13). Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Munter, J. (2002). Linking community and classroom in higher education: Service learning and student empowerment. *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing, 10*(2), 151-164.

Ponder, J., Vander Veldt, M., & Lewis-Ferrell, G. (2011). Citizenship, curriculum, and critical thinking beyond the four walls of the classroom: Linking the academic content with service-learning. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 38*(4), 45-68.

Prentice, M. (2011). Civic engagement among community college students through service learning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *35*(11), 842-854.

Stewart, T., & Allen, K. (2011). The effects of service-learning participation on pre-internship educators' teachers' sense of efficacy. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *57*(3), 298-316.

What is family life education? (n.d.) Retrieved from http://www.ncfr.org/cfle-certification/what-family-life-education on 6/18/2012.

Wilson, J. C. (2011). Service-learning and the development of empathy in US college students. *Education + Training*, *53*(2/3), 207-217. doi:10.1108/00400911111115735

Youniss, J., & Yates, M., (1997), *Community service and social responsibility in youth*. Chicago, Il.: University of Chicago Press.

Zlotkowski, E. (1996). Opportunity for all: Linking service learning and business education. Journal of Business Ethics, 15 (1), 5-20.

Biographical Informaion

  Scott Tobias is an assistant professor of human development and family studies at Kent State University at Stark. He earned his BA in psychology from Miami University in 1999, his MS in family studies from Miami University in 2003, and a PhD in Human Environmental Sciences from the University of

Missouri in 2009. His research focus centers on how video games impact children, adolescents, and families as well as post-secondary pedagogy. His career has also allowed multiple opportunities to teach courses covering a wide variety of family studies, human development, and psychology courses. This has also afforded him the opportunity to present guest lectures and research presentations in various settings as well as serve as a mentor to other graduate students in their own teaching.