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Service-Learning: A Valuable Component of Pre-Service Teacher Education

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Introduction

Since the late 1990s service-learning programs as a teaching pedagogy have become increasingly popular in Australia within primary, secondary and tertiary education (Lavery & Hackett, 2008; Service-Learning Australia Inc., 2010). However, such programs require a commitment to providing resources, staffing, finance and time, which may lead some to wonder about the importance of these programs (Karayan & Gathercoal, 2005). There is also the danger that, as service programs become more commonplace, they may well fade into the educational routine or become "another educational fad and another failed social program" (Rue, 1996, p. 246). Service-learning programs at a tertiary level within teacher education aim to give students a hands-on experience in an area that is potentially outside of their comfort zone (Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Galiardi, 2009). These programs encourage pre-service teachers to experience situations which allow them to grow as individuals and professionals. In particular, aspects of leadership, empathy, collaboration, community, knowledge and skills are developed (Kaye, 2004). In this article the authors explore and describe the experiences of pre-service teachers in the School of Education (UNDA) undertaking two service leaning units, with a view to interrogating ways these experiences can enhance pre-service teacher education.

Service-Learning

Definitions of service-learning vary considerably among those who work within the field. However, at its heart, "service learning is a form of experiential learning that employs service as its modus operandi" (Crews, 1995, p.1). Specifically, service-learning is a teaching method "which combines community service and academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility" (Centre for Service and Leadership, n.d., p.1). Service-learning methodologies aim to motivate students, provide valuable services to others, build connections between universities or schools with their communities and give people real reasons for reflection (Butcher, Howard, McMeniman & Thom, 2005; Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Galiardi, 2009; Lawrence & Butler, 2010). Most

service work fits into the categories of welfare, empowerment and advocacy. Examples include working with community organisations such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, day-care centres, and facilities for those with disabilities (Levision, 1994).

The authors suggest there are four basic elements to an effective service-learning program. First, students must be engaged in meaningful, hands-on service that addresses real-life needs in the community. It is only through such worthwhile service that students can gain valuable knowledge and skills that assists them to connect with the content of their tertiary studies in an authentic manner (Schoenfield, 2006, p. 1). Second, implicit in the practice of service-learning is that the service and the learning goals are of equal importance (Jacoby, 1996, p. 4). Hence the significance of the hyphen in the term 'service-learning': it is more than grammatical, it is symbolic. Third, there is an important component of reciprocity between those serving and those receiving the service. In particular, those receiving the service must control the service provided where "the needs of the community, as determined by its members, define what the service tasks will be" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 7).

The fourth element refers specifically to the implementation of the service-learning program, in that there are four interdependent stages inherent in the actual program delivery: preparation, action, reflection and demonstration. Preparation involves identifying a need, investigating and analysing the need, and devising a plan of action. Action is the direct result of preparation. Reflection enables students to consider how the experience, knowledge and skills they are acquiring relate to their own lives and their communities. Demonstration requires students to exhibit their expertise though public displays, presentations, letters to the editor, class lessons that draw on the preparation, action and reflection stages of their experiences (Kaye, 2004). Adherence to these four basic elements, meaningful hands-on service, the linking of service and learning goals, reciprocity between those serving and those being served, and a structured program for participants, enables students of all ages and ability levels to participate successfully and safely in service-learning activities (Scott, 2006).

Service-Learning Programs

The School of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA), Fremantle Campus, currently offers two specific service-learning units. These units are *Education, Service and Community Engagement* and *Inclusive Education*. Both these units address the elements that are essential for a comprehensive service-learning program. The pre-service teachers are engaged in meaningful hands-on service with people who are marginalised or disabled. The programs, which have been running for between five and seven years, stress the equal importance of both the service and the learning that arises from the service. Both of the units are run by individual lecturers with minimal outside support. The units were charged at the same rate as a standard lecture unit. The lecturers have, over a period of time, built a solid network of community organisations and schools willing to provide placements for the pre-service teachers. The people who are being served determine the services that they require from the pre-service teachers, and the pre-service teachers are expected to strictly comply with these requirements. Pre-service teacher reflections constitute a substantial component of both units. These two units support and strengthen existing conceptual understandings presented in other units of work within the teacher education programs by providing an opportunity for pre-service teachers to experience real-world situations, both educationally and in the wider society. Although there are many similarities, the individual units differ in both structure and focus. The specific programs will now be described.

Education, Service and Community Engagement

This compulsory unit forms part of the program in the Bachelor of Education (Secondary), the Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) and the Master of Teaching (Secondary). It is offered in the first semester of the university year. There are two components to the unit: lectures/workshops, and community placement. The lectures and workshops provide a theoretical understanding of social justice. Topics include poverty, third world debt, ecology, indigenous Australians, and refugees. Community placement involves pre-service teachers undertaking 12 hours of service-learning. Placements that pre-service teachers have accessed include learning support centres (Primary and Secondary), aged care, working with the homeless, Blind Association, drug rehabilitation, refugees, prison inmates, pregnancy support (for teenage mothers), horse riding for the disabled, Oxfam community aid, St Vincent De Paul, Salvation

Army, Red Cross, soup vans, and cancer patients.

Time is allocated at the beginning of the unit to prepare pre-service teachers for their twelve hours of service. During this time the notion of service-learning is explored and possible placements discussed. Reflection is undertaken in the form of group discussion, formal classroom presentations and journal writing. Examples of past pre-service teachers' reflections are also provided to demonstrate the depth of reflection that is required. There are three designated sessions in the program to monitor the progress of the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers share experiences, successes and challenges during these sessions. At the final workshop pre-service teachers deliver a verbal presentation on their service-learning experiences and submit a detailed reflective journal. The unit is founded on the notion of integrating personal values, beliefs and service by providing pre-service teachers with the opportunity to consider and contribute to the common good. The unit aims to develop a culture of serving others, to prepare young people for service leadership, and to promote values by attending to specific needs of the community, especially those of the underprivileged (Lavery, 2007).

Inclusive Education

This unit is offered as the first of an optional four-unit series designed to prepare pre-service teachers to cater for students with special needs. These pre-service teachers are enrolled in the first year of a Bachelor of Education (Primary) degree and have chosen to complete this specialisation as a component of their course. The unit content includes the introduction and examination of policies in the area of inclusion and discussion of inclusion in relation to disability, gender and culture. The focus of the unit is to introduce pre-service teachers to inclusive education principles and practices and encourage them to explore their own attitudes and beliefs about inclusion. The unit employs a number of pedagogies which include lectures, workshops, group activities, problem-based learning and simulations. Reflection, in the form of discussion, takes place throughout the workshops for the unit, particularly as pre-service teachers link their prior knowledge and understandings with their recent experiences.

As previously stated, pre-service teachers are required to complete 12 hours of community service-learning. The pre-service teachers select a placement which requires them to assist a person with a disability to access the community or school. Examples include working at the Deaf society, bowling and playing cards with a person with a physical disability, helping at learning support centres and in mainstream classrooms, attending exhibitions, attending a concert or movies with people with intellectual disabilities or just sharing coffee with a youth group for adolescents with a range of disabilities. The unit aims to bring together theory in inclusive practice with practical application and experience with people with special needs in real-life settings (Chambers & Forlin, 2010). Change of attitudes, active involvement in the community and collaborative practice are seen as key indicators of effective involvement in the program. The pre-service teachers are required to complete and submit a written report on their experiences. This report requires an examination of their experience, attitudes and beliefs.

Methodology

This study seeks to address the question: What are the experiences of pre-service teachers undertaking specific service-learning units as a component of their undergraduate teaching program? Data collection comprised of examination of pre-service teacher experiences and reflections derived from description and analysis contained in their written responses. Pre-service teachers studying *Education, Service and Community Engagement* completed a reflective journal, while pre-service teachers studying *Inclusive Education* produced a written report reflecting on pre and post experience beliefs. Students were encouraged to reflect on both positive and negative elements of their service experience, what they were discovering about society, and what they were learning about themselves. Students were asked to consider how they had been influenced, challenged, and stimulated by their experiences.

An interpretive paradigm incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens provided the theoretical perspective for the study. Symbolic interaction directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those being studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with this perspective the current study allows the researchers to examine the service-learning experiences of the pre-

service teachers from the pre-service teachers' point of view. Discourse analysis was the preferred methodology used to explore individuals' perceptions of their own experiences while undertaking a service-learning program (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). Discourse analysis involves selecting representative segments of language used in the reflective feedback documents and then arranging them into thematic units (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These thematic units form the basis for the understanding of the pre-service teachers' experiences and perceptions and permits determination of the value for pre-service teacher education.

The format for analysing the data was consistent with that described by Miles and Huberman (1984). The format consisted of data collection, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. First, each researcher read the pre-service teacher journals and reports. The data was then reduced through the use of emerging themes (as headings), each researcher selecting segments of language that highlighted particular themes. These segments were then displayed visually under each theme heading and both researchers perused each list and jointly selected appropriate exemplars of each theme. The combined total enrolment for the two School of Education service-learning units during 2010 was one hundred and one students. To avoid the possibility that pre-service teachers were writing simply to earn a good grade from their instructor, they were encouraged to write freely about any negative aspects which were evident during their experiences. Human Research Ethical clearance was obtained for the *Inclusive Education* unit and permission letters were signed by each individual completing the *Education, Service and Community Engagement* to allow the researchers to utilise the reflective journals.

Discussion

While pre-service teachers were encouraged to incorporate both positive and negative elements in their writing, the overwhelming majority of comments were positive. The negative elements included time issues (in particular time to complete the service hour requirements within the time constraints of the unit) and concerns about teaching students with disabilities due to increased knowledge about disability. Reporting of concerns was minimal (less than 5% of respondents). Six overarching themes emerged from the data: empathy, leadership, self and societal reflection, confidence,

professional practice and knowledge and skills. While not every participant provided comment on every theme, what became evident during data analysis was that all had touched on one or more of the themes in a substantial manner. There was no distinct hierarchy identified amongst themes, however, differences in responses were evident depending upon the type of service-learning undertaken by the individual (i.e. educationally-based as opposed to working within the wider community). There appeared to be little difference in the responses between those completing a primary or secondary education program. What now follows are pre-service teacher comments, which illustrate the six themes.

Empathy

Being empathetic requires that an individual takes on someone else's perspective, particularly someone who may be in a very different situation to themselves. Empathy goes beyond sympathy in that a fuller understanding of others and their situation is required (Gerdes, 2011). Three examples drawn from the data serve to illustrate how service-learning can build empathy: "I went into the experience not knowing what to expect, and came out with more love and respect for the children, who were strangers to me, than I thought was possible"; "I am astounded that someone who has had to overcome knockbacks and challenges can be a positive, intellectual and caring human being. The time I spent on my service has enabled me to build a bond and friendship with my student, which will hopefully continue in the future"; "By observing M I feel like I have a better understanding of the needs of a person with a disability and better understand that more than anything most people with disabilities seemingly yearn to have the same opportunities as people without".

Leadership

One of the aims of a service-learning program should be to develop leadership potential in all participants. This can be achieved through participants taking initiative, solving problems, working as a team, and helping others (Kaye, 2004). Examples of pre-service teachers demonstrating some of these aspects are: "My experience has inspired me to promote inclusivity to others and has motivated me to continue helping others. Overall, my experience has confirmed that I have chosen the right pathway"; "the experience has also

encouraged me to persuade others to visualise the benefits of this kind of experience, and to get as many people involved as possible, as the future holds a more involved approach towards inclusion not only in school, but in wider society and this is important to know"; "Community service isn't about stuffing one's resume or doing things so that we might be proud or egotistical about it. It is about drawing the realization and the greater understanding of our society, humanity and our vulnerability as a community. Community service helps people gain a greater appreciation of, and respect for, the lives of people who we deem as 'normal', when, in fact, if you take a step back and look at them, they are extraordinary".

Self & Society

Reflection is a critical component of the service-learning program (Gilding & Wallace, 2003). Specific aspects include both self and societal reflection. Self reflection is an insight into some aspect of individual development, indicating a change in values, thoughts, or understandings. Some examples are: "I felt very proud of myself as I not only did something out of my comfort zone, but helped another individual"; "This service-learning component has been a major learning curve for me. It has taught me that I don't have a right to judge and categorise someone who I don't even know. I have not walked in their shoes, nor have I experienced any part of their life"; "After my community service experience, I definitely feel as though my mind and heart have been opened to allow previous judgements to be altered". Self reflections can often echo the challenges that participants experienced: "Today made me realize that I complain about silly things that really do not matter. I should be grateful for all that I have and all of the simple things that I take for granted"; "My first day was eye opening, as I soon learnt that fears of the excretion of bodily fluids, loud noises and invasion of personal space all needed to be confronted and resolved, if I was to make the most of my experience"; "My appreciation for my own capabilities, such as my sight, hearing, intellectual state and my ability to freely move was dramatically increased".

Societal reflections entail looking beyond the immediate experiences and examining how these experiences impact society as a whole. For example, "a society that only deals with problems as they arise, rather than looking to prevention, is a society that is shooting itself in the foot"; "I have learnt throughout this experience that for all

to be equally accepted, community involvement is necessary"; "I have learnt that while there is much negativity surrounding youth, it is our young people who are making some of the biggest positive changes within our wider community".

Confidence

Service-learning experiences provide people with the opportunities to confront and overcome unfamiliar situations in proactive ways. Such opportunities invariably lead to an increase in participants' confidence in approaching new situations (Lavery, 2007). Three examples encapsulate the participants' responses: "…gave me the confidence to realise that I can deal with anything if I have the right mind frame and handle situations accordingly"; "To say that my feelings have changed from the day I started, to the day I finished this experience is an understatement. I thoroughly enjoyed my time with J and the whole year 4 class. As my confidence grew I looked forward to the time I spent in the class each week"; "Not only was I unaware of the challenge ahead of me, it was one of the most rewarding and fulfilling tasks I have ever encountered. I will continue to work diligently in this area, simply because of the joy I received from working with such special people".

Professional practice

The learning component of any service-learning program at tertiary level should, ideally, impact upon professional practice (Donnison & Itter, 2010). In the case of pre-service teachers, professional practice relates directly to the capacity to work with young people in an educational setting. Participants articulated a significant number of comments in this area, including: "As a result, I now feel it is my duty to assist those children in all aspects of the educational process, while catering for their special needs"; "He told me that, as a teacher I needed to develop relationships, never assume anything and to have high expectations of all. I will take that with me in my career whichever profession I end up in"; "I have also learnt that in the classroom, teaching responsibility by encouraging contributions, teaching empathy, offering encouragement and positive feedback and helping children deal with mistakes is what makes for effective inclusion and acceptance of all".

Knowledge and skills

While professional practice is more of an all encompassing aspect of service-learning programs, increased skills and knowledge tend to be specific to the individuals and may be a consolidation of previous skills and understandings (Colby, Bercaw, Clark & Galiardi, 2009). Many participants were able to effectively articulate the skills and knowledge learnt in fine detail. Examples include: "I learnt from spending time with him, that clapping my hands and encouraging him to clap his own hands, worked to calm him down dramatically. Tactics such as these, furthered my knowledge about managing children of all abilities and behaviours"; "I learnt from her that people with disabilities know when you don't understand them, which I can imagine would happen often and would be very frustrating"; "I was able to visit each unit and interact with children on different levels which I found really enriching in terms of building my knowledge of how to deal with different issues that may be associated with different disabilities, physical or intellectual".

Conclusion

This study set out to explore and describe the experiences of service-learning from the perspective of pre-service in two undergraduate service-learning units in the School of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia. Written reflections from pre-service teachers served to provide insights into their perspectives on their service-learning experiences. Six overarching themes emerged from the data: empathy, leadership, self and societal reflection, confidence, professional practice and increased knowledge and skills. These themes suggest that the service learning programs were important and valuable; both in enhancing participants' understanding of others' experiences and needs, and in assisting participants to learn more about themselves.

Reflection is a key element of any service-learning program, as well as being a key element of effective teaching (Butcher, et al., 2005). Whilst completing the service-learning units participants were required to reflect deeply and often. Only through reflection can experiential learning take place (Power, 2010). Participation within the service-learning units encouraged participants to display empathy as a direct result of working and playing and reflecting, alongside people who are marginalised in society. Through these interactions pre-service teachers developed the ability to adopt another's perspective. Such ability is valuable in a teaching situation as it leads

to an improved capacity to perceive an issue from a student's perspective, in turn allowing the teacher to formulate a considered response. Participants developed greater confidence in their own abilities through confronting unfamiliar situations and overcoming difficulties during their service-learning experience. Confidence is a critical issue for teachers as it gives them the courage and motivation to undertake varied educational duties.

Service-learning experiences enabled participants to develop diverse knowledge and skills in a wide range of areas. These areas included, but were not limited to, communication skills, behaviour management, collaboration, knowledge of functional capabilities, how society works, the nature of marginalised people, and organisational skills. All of these different forms of skills and knowledge are of significant benefit to teachers in their professional practice, within and outside of, the classroom. Further, leadership is inextricably linked to professional practice. Service-learning experiences provided opportunities for pre-service teachers to demonstrate leadership skills, a critical consideration for young teachers, given that teaching, by its very nature, is a leadership role (Crowther, Ferguson & Hann, 2008).

Responses from pre-service teachers in the School of Education (UNDA) suggest a passionate and deep reaction to their service-learning experiences. As the comments of two pre-service teachers illustrate: "We need to build relationships and bring our talents and gifts to assist others. These services that we provide can enable those who are invisible, voiceless or de-valued in our society to become seen, heard and valued. Through service to others we will appreciate even more the satisfaction of giving oneself to other people"; "I envision a world where students with special needs are not victims of discrimination or stigmatisation and are fully included not only in mainstream school but in the community and society as a whole". Service-learning units act to strengthen pre-service teachers' capacity to empathise, be resilient, use initiative, reflect on one's own practice, grow as an individual, develop and hone leadership skills and become more competent and capable practitioners. In this way the service learning units demonstrate their importance and value in pre-service teacher education.

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