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Christian Service Learning – Does it make a Difference?

Over the last ten years community service has become a commonly accepted practice in many schools and universities, both nationally and internationally. Increasingly, secondary and tertiary institutions have involved students in programs of service learning, volunteerism, community outreach, or Christian service learning. However, is there a danger that, as service learning programs become more commonplace, they either fade into the institutional routine, or, as Rue (1996) remarks, become “another educational fad and another failed social program” (p. 246)? This article seeks to explore the experiences and reflections of tertiary students involved in a Christian service learning program in the School of Education at the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA). What becomes obvious from student experiences and reflections is that Christian service learning has a dramatic and immediate impact on students. But, is this enough? Do we who work with students in such programs need to ensure that service learning does not become just another educational task, and one more item on the list of requirements for graduation?

Theoretical Context

Literature on Christian service learning is limited. What is more readily available is literature on service learning (as distinct from Christian service learning). Definitions of service learning vary considerably among those who embrace it. However, at its heart, “service-learning is a form of experiential learning that employs service as its modus operandi” (Crews, 1995, p. 1). Service-learning methodologies aim to motivate students, provide valuable service to others, build connections between universities or schools with their communities, and give students real reasons for writing and other forms of reflection (Bennett, 2000). Most service work fits into the categories of welfare, empowerment and advocacy, for example, community

organizations such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, day care centres, and facilities for those with disabilities (Levison, 1994).

From the perspective of those performing the service there are three basic components to effective service learning. These involve efficient preparation, which includes setting objectives for skills to be learned or issues to consider, performing the service, and the analysis of experiences through a process of reflection or de-briefing (<http://csf.coloradod.edu/sl/what-is-it.htm>). There is also the component of reciprocity between those serving and the person or group being served. Jacoby (1996) points out that those being served must control the service provided in that “the needs of the community, as determined by its members, define what the service tasks will be” (p. 7).

Service learning, therefore, engages students, whether they are primary, secondary or tertiary, in activities that address human and community needs. Students are afforded structured opportunities specifically designed to promote student learning and development. Intrinsic to the process of service learning is reflection and reciprocity (Jacoby, p. 5). Moreover, it is essential that the needs and the dignity of those being served are respected at all times. Finally, service learning has the potential to promote active citizenship (Levison, 1994) and model social justice (Lewis, 2004).

By way of contrast, Christian service learning places experiential learning and service learning methodologies in the context of the Gospel. The Religious Education and Curriculum Committee, a standing committee of the Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia (CECWA), highlights three essential elements of Christian

service learning for Catholic education. Firstly, the concept of Christian means that the Gospel informs the service learning. That is, students interact and serve others as Jesus commanded: “He (the Lord) has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). Secondly, the term ‘service’ means that students are actively involved in outreach to the community. Thirdly, learning is drawn from lessons of experience in performing the service work through a practice of guided reflection for the students. Christian service learning thus provides students with the opportunity “to develop and learn through thoughtfully organised service that: (a) is based on the Gospel imperative; (b) meets the real needs of the community; and (c) includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience” (CECWA, 2006, p. 2).

A Designated Christian Service Learning Unit

The School of Education (UNDA) offers a specific Christian service learning unit entitled JS223/423 Education, Service and Community Engagement (The JS code denotes Justice Studies). First taught in 2004, approximately 140 students have so far taken this nine-week unit, which forms part of the program in the Bachelor of Education (secondary) and is an elective for students studying the Graduate Diploma of Education or Master of Teaching courses. The unit is founded on the notion of integrating personal values/beliefs and volunteering by providing students with the opportunity to consider and contribute to the common good as espoused by the Gospel. Moreover, students are challenged through experiential learning and structured reflection to think critically on themselves, and on society (Freire, 1974). The theological concept of *metanoia*, that is, a “change of heart” (Treston, 1994), underpins the unit. The unit thus aims to develop a culture of serving others, to

prepare young people for service leadership, and to promote Christian values by attending to specific needs of the community, especially those of the underprivileged.

There are two components to the unit. Firstly, a series of lectures and workshops provide a theoretical understanding of social justice. Topics include: Catholic Teaching on Social Justice, Poverty, Third World Debt, Ecology, Theology of Liberation, Indigenous Australians, and Refugees. These topics are explored in such a way as to provide a Christian context for the unit. Secondly, students complete a practical component of 12 hours of service. Placements undertaken by students include: Learning Support Centres (both primary and secondary), aged care, the homeless, the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, drug rehabilitation, refugees, dementia patients, people in prison, pregnancy support, horse riding for the disabled, Oxfam Community Aid, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army, Soup vans, and the Cancer Council. Specific time is allocated in the unit to prepare students for their 12 hours of service (Week 1), to monitor student progress (Weeks 4 and 6), and to analyse the experiences of the service (Week 9). Monitoring involves group discussion, where students share key experiences, successes, and challenges. By way of analysis, students present a verbal presentation of their Christian service learning in the final workshop of the unit and submit a detailed journal.

The rationale behind linking the theory and practice of social justice in the School of Education UNDA Christian service learning unit is that a critical social consciousness, so necessary for adult spiritual formation, is formed through the study of appropriate literature and social documents in the context of working with those who are disadvantaged (Dorr, 1991; Holland & Henriot, 1983). That is, if social

injustice is to be addressed by concerned citizens, then these citizens need to be informed, skilled and committed to making the necessary changes (Hollenbach, 1979; Wren, 1977). Through reflection on the service undertaken, a depth of learning can emerge which informs theory and effective action for justice (Cardijn, 1964; Wallis, 1982).

Methodology

This article seeks to explore the experiences and reflections of tertiary students involved in a Christian service learning program in the School of Education UNDA. These experiences and reflections are derived from description and analysis contained in student journals, which the author read between 2004 and 2006, and from one student presentation that the author vividly remembers. In their journals, 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. Student experiences and reflections on service undertaken are presented under the frameworks of: The Nature of Christian Service Learning, Social Awareness, and Transformation (“change of heart”). Both oral and written permission were obtained from students to use material contained in the journals. Anonymity was guaranteed by the use of pseudonyms.

The Nature of Christian Service learning

Student comments made it clear that Christian service can be challenging for the student, requires a certain sacrifice on behalf of the student, and can often lead the student to discovering some hard truths. In other words, Christian service learning is

not simply some expedient “feel-good” experience. Examples include: “I think the most significant experience to come from my placement would be a realisation of my own selfishness”; “Australia is not ‘the land of a fair go’ – the structures of society continue to support the dominant, powerful group and disempower the ‘other’”; “many of the stories I heard tonight were sad and desperate, often the same women returning on an endless cycle of dependence on men, drugs and refuges”. Such comments highlight an apparent paradox of Christian service learning: the misunderstanding that hard or difficult experiences are bad, and hence inappropriate for students. In fact, the very opposite is true, as illustrated in the following extract:

A young guy came in and told me he had just shot up with heroin. I had never seen anyone under the influence of heroin before. I was shocked. I gave him a bed and a sandwich. I noticed he was quite shaky and cautious, and his eyes were very bloodshot. This hit me. The drug just became real to me. I saw what it did to people, how it starts to destroy them. I had learnt so much about drugs and about the lifestyle of users. But it wasn't until I saw this guy that I really understood the drug.

Intrinsic to Christian service learning is the opportunity to grow by processing such challenging experiences.

This article does not imply, however, that Christian service learning experiences only generate critical or negative responses. To the contrary, students often derived much optimism from their experiences: “I have enjoyed it ... I have learnt that some people so selflessly devote themselves to other people, and this gives me faith in society”; “I thought it was really positive that these weaker students had a specific program to improve their skills”; “I admire these (blind) people incredibly, I believe they would have to be extremely brave and very trusting of the people around them to deal with everyday life”.

Social Awareness

Without reflection, Christian service learning equates to volunteerism (Lavery & Richards, 2006). The unit offered in the UNDA School of Education requires students, both in their journal writing and in discussion, to engage in social analysis by critically reflecting on their service learning experiences. Two prominent themes emerge from student reflections – frustration at a system which either discriminates against or ignores people in need, and a realisation of the dangers of stereotyping.

Frustration at what students see as unjust structures and behaviour is a common reaction. Examples include: “government economic rationalism dominates the way health issues are addressed in the media and/or promoted in Australia”; “one thing continues to confront me, and that is the prejudice and ignorance that exists in society”; “I think ignorance underpins the concept of the disabled as ‘them’”. One university student, assigned to help a Year 10 student who had recently missed considerable schooling due to emotional problems, remarked, “I was appalled at how her teachers did not seem to be particularly concerned with helping her to catch up or even include her in class or group work”. Another student raised the following questions after spending time with the elderly: “When will society get the priorities right? How can we sit by and let these people feel alone and unimportant when they hold the key to our past? Why is so little value placed on getting old in western culture?”

Students also remarked on the dangers of typecasting. Two examples serve to illustrate the point. The first is from a student who worked with refugees:

It is now clear to me that stereotyping and pre-judgements only serve to break down communities and to separate people. It is important to remember that despite age, sex, race and culture, we are all human beings;

we are all the children of God, and therefore should treat each other as brothers and sisters.

The second example derives from experiences of working with a soup van. The student noted the “impossibility” of fitting particular people “into the mould of the needy”. As he remarked: “Not every Indigenous Australian I saw on the street was in need of soup; not every middle aged white Australian in a suit was *not* in need of soup.”

Transformation

As well as engaging in social analysis, students who undertake the UNDA School of Education Christian service learning unit are challenged to reflect personally on their experiences. The underlying question is: to what extent does community engagement based on the Gospel have a transformative influence on the individual? Student comments suggest a strong transformative effect. Key amongst student responses were the notions of individual responsibility, personal development, and a sense of compassion.

Where social analysis asks what can governments and people in authority do to address social ills, transformation invites the question: what can I do? One particular student explains:

It is my responsibility to act where I see injustice, to educate about the effects of racism, exclusion, and marginalisation. It is my responsibility to take care of the environment, to live in a non-violent way, to be involved in and to involve others in issues which threaten social justice. It is my responsibility to stir myself from my comfort zone and ensure against complacency. It is my responsibility to care.

From a practical perspective, students commented on the desire to persist with their community service even after the unit finished: “I’m going to continue to work at St

Pat's for as long as my Uni timetable permits, as it's such a worthwhile and useful centre that helps so many different people in restoring their self-confidence and dignity"; "I learnt that I definitely want to make room in my life for some sort of volunteer work"; "this experience has encouraged me to take an active part in the community, to step out of my comfort zone and not be complacent"; "I have enjoyed my time working with the Camp Quality Puppets and will continue to lend a hand for as long as I can".

Students remarked on how involvement in Christian service learning enhanced their personal skills and development. One student, who spent time with the elderly, noted: "even though there have been some unnerving experiences, overall I feel I have developed better communication skills and motivation in life." Another student, who helped children with special needs, observed: "I have grown from the experience, I no longer take my good health and ability to learn for granted, and strive to be more compassionate of others who are less capable." There was also the student who helped children with Down syndrome, who wrote: "I found the placement experience invaluable to me as a person, father and as a member of society".

A strong factor in student responses was the sense of compassion and concern for those with whom they interacted. A student, who worked with prison inmates in the community re-entry program, commented on how these men's freedoms were restricted and their lives "formatted by prison regulations". She noted that "so many of the men in re-entry training today are being detained for their second or third time". She went on to state: "this is not life; however, for some of them it is a way of life." Another student, who helped children with visual impairment, wrote:

'Richard' approached me when he was secure as to who I was, or that my smell/touch and voice were familiar to him. Eventually he held my hand and waited until I directed him outside to the sand pit. It is here that I noticed that on top of all his disabilities, he had a hearing aid in each ear. Could life have dealt this poor little boy any more restrictions to enjoying a full life? Nevertheless, his sweet, lovable nature transcends all physical 'imperfections' and he becomes the most perfect child I know. In some ways his disabilities make him more special, softer, kinder and more sensitive inside and outside.

A third example derives from a student who volunteered for the Association for the Blind of Western Australia. At the beginning of her formal presentation at the University she blindfolded the class and only then commenced talking. One of the events she related was that, during her induction day, all the would-be volunteers were similarly blindfolded and invited to eat a meal as a way of gaining a slight insight into the difficulties confronting blind people. She reflected on her own initial unease at not knowing what the meal was, of how she often placed the fork in her mouth without any food on it, and the pervading sense of embarrassment she felt. A profound silence descended on the class when the blindfolds were removed, and a sense of realisation and awareness was clearly evident.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explore the experiences and reflections of tertiary students involved in a Christian service learning unit conducted in the School of Education UNDA. Student responses indicate that Christian service learning can be challenging, confronting, and demanding. Responses also suggest that involvement in the program gives students a sense of satisfaction, a feeling for social awareness, and real opportunities for learning and personal transformation. What is less obvious in student responses is a clear articulation of the Gospel imperative underpinning the program. That is, how is social action explicitly linked with Jesus' words: "in so far

as you did this to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40)? Developing this link between social action and the Gospel is a priority, which the unit must address.

Does involvement in Christian service learning make a difference? Responses by students in the School of Education UNDA suggest a passionate and immediate reaction to their Christian service learning experiences. There was not a single journal that the author read which did not contain some element of learning, raised self-awareness, social discernment, or compassion. As the comments of one student, who was “a little annoyed” initially at having to do the service component of the unit, illustrate:

Three hours on a Saturday morning turned out to be so easy for me to commit to, and yet was so greatly appreciated. The smiles and thank-yous I received for what felt like minimal effort really surprised me. It opened my eyes to the desperation and frustration felt by so many people. For a little commitment, there is a lot of reward. I look forward to continuing with community placement, and making it a regular part of my life. Nothing compares to the feeling of helping someone achieve a positive goal.

Perhaps the more important question now becomes: What, if any, are the longer-term effects of participation in a Christian service learning program? That is, to what extent are the transformations that many of the students articulated lasting, and how are these transformations manifested in the future? Do those, for example, who indicate they wish to continue with some form of service, actually do so? Given the particular nature of this cohort of students, one is also tempted to ask: What on-going influence does a Christian service learning program have on these young people as teachers? Exploring the longer-term effects of Christian service learning programs on students is the next step in critiquing the value of these programs in our educational

institutions. Such research is also a way of reducing the danger that Christian service learning programs not become routine or jaded.

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