

Elementary teacher utilisation of service learning as methodology during student teaching placements

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Many universities around the world are using service learning in courses to enhance their students' mastery of course content and commitment to social justice. Teacher education faculties have additionally experimented with service learning as a way of providing authentic field experiences at inner city schools for their teacher candidates. This study explores a different version of service learning—teacher candidates' uses of service learning as a teaching methodology during their student teaching placements.

Twenty years ago it rained for two weeks straight and it rarely rains in Southern California. My fourth graders and I were going crazy! As faculty advisor for the student council, I was housing all of the food collected during our annual holiday drive. Boxes and boxes were stacked in the back of our classroom. We were just completing a unit on nutrition when I had a moment of brilliance. What if we sorted all of the food into well-balanced meals for families of four rather than just randomly distributing our donations? What if we studied poverty and reflected on its implications for our community? What if we wrote cards explaining the food pyramid to accompany each meal? What if we analysed what foods groups we were missing and designed and posted notices around the school asking for specific donations? What if we added up the calories? Suddenly the rain didn't matter at all... It wasn't until I started working on my PhD a decade later that I heard the term service learning.

Universities in the United States, and throughout the world, are engaging their undergraduates in service learning across many academic disciplines; a wide variety of positive student outcomes have been well researched. Volumes compiled by Anderson, Swick and Yff, (2001), Butin, (2005), and Eyler and Giles, (1999) document professors' usage of service learning in a wide variety of courses. Several student handbooks designed to accompany these collegiate service learning courses have been developed such as the one authored by Cress, Collier, Reitenauer and Associates (2005). School-age children have also been involved in various types of service learning experiences for the past several years. Academic growth—particularly in writing—has been well documented by researchers such as Atwell (1998), Gadecki (2005), Gere and Sinor (1997), Jennings (2001), and Spivey (2005). In 2005, Gathercoal and Karayan wrote that approximately 20% of teacher education faculties in the United States had experimented with service learning as a way of providing authentic field experiences at inner city schools.

Typically university students participate in service learning experiences designed to augment student learning in specific courses (Eyler & Giles, 1999). This study explores an alternative version of service learning in teacher education — student teachers' use of service learning as a teaching methodology during their final, semester-long field experience. Little is known about this application of service learning. This project examines 50 teacher candidates' implementation of service learning with their

elementary students during the 2008-2009 academic year at one university located in the northeastern United States. I was interested in examining the following two questions:

- How could student teachers utilise service learning in their classroom placements?
- What would teacher candidates learn about teaching, about service learning, and about their students?

Background and literature review

Service learning may be operationalised as a teaching methodology/ philosophy that involves integrating community service with academic goals (Butin, 2005) and ongoing reflection (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer & Associates, 2005). The roots of service learning can be traced back to Dewey's (1938/1997) model of experiential education. The value of field based experiences in teacher education has been well documented and student teaching has long been a staple of teacher education (Alvermann, 1990). These forms of experiential learning allow for a direct relationship between what university students are learning on campus and their practice working out in the real world (Gallina & Moely, 2002). Like traditional field-work, during a service learning experience "students engage in community service activities with intentional academic goals" (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer & Associates, 2005, p.7). However, I posit that meaningful service learning for teacher candidates differs from its more traditional counterpart in several key ways.

First, the experience is reciprocal in nature in that it benefits the community while enhancing university students' personal learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999). During a service learning experience, teacher candidates engage in closely-monitored, semester-long, meaningful projects directly related to academic outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gallina & Moely, 2002) that develop a greater understanding of course content than could be achieved solely on campus (Kelleche & Farley, 2006). At the same time, candidates make a reciprocal contribution to local neighborhoods and communities (Root, Anderson, Callahan, Duckenfield, Hill, Pickeral & Wade, 1998) by serving diverse student populations (Nieto, 1996) at local, underachieving, partnership schools (Kelleche & Farley, 2006). In a reciprocal experience, learning occurs for all participants (Myers, & Pickeral, 1997; Root et al, 1998) and civic responsibility can be developed (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont & Stephens, 2003).

Reflection plays a critical role in developing understandings. Service learning revolves around a cycle of experiential education. After each experience, students are provided with "opportunities for reflection that connect to their academic disciplines" (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer & Associates, 2005, p.7) within the context of educational practices (Anderson, 1998). These connections between personal knowledge (experiences), professional knowledge, and practical knowledge (Vacca et al, 2006) allow for a deeper understanding of course content than could be achieved solely on campus (Kelleche & Farley, 2006). By participating in a variety of meaningful and educative weekly reflections (Ash & Clayton, 2004) candidates can examine, not only what they and their students are learning, but why these children are at risk for academic failure and how service learning can effect academic outcomes (Anderson, 1998; Hatton & Smith, 1995;

Willis, 2003). Reflection also provides opportunities for the candidates to grapple with notions of white privilege and power (Jones, Gilbride-Brown & Gasiorski, 2005).

Service learning also includes opportunities for teacher candidates to form respectful relationships with students who are racially and culturally different from themselves (Dilg, 2003). Candidates leave their monocultural world and interact with those of varying backgrounds, heritages, and economic status (Nieto, 1996). Teaching in urban classrooms allows teacher candidates to begin to understand the complexities faced by urban youths (Willis, 2003) and to see the children they are serving as individuals rather than just an assignment (Kaye, 2004).

Ultimately, service learning encourages teacher candidates to begin to see that they have a responsibility to serve under represented populations (Root et al., 1998). Eyster and Giles (1999) research concluded that service learning can be an effective pedagogy for developing social responsibility, civic engagement and changing students' attitudes from "I ought to [to] I must and will do" (p. 157).

All education majors at the university are required to complete a minimum of 10 hours of service learning per year in order to graduate. In the recent past, students were allowed so much latitude in their site selection that these hours tended to become service oriented rather than service learning experiences. However, all second year students are required to take my reading methods course. For the past three years I have worked hard to ensure that the teacher candidates enrolled in this course experience optimal, research based service learning as described above. Additionally, during this course candidates are required to utilise service learning as a teaching methodology while tutoring struggling readers (Gallina & Moely, 2002); that is, the teacher candidates directly engage elementary students in authentic service learning projects closely linked to academic standards and measure both academic and social outcomes (Kaye, 2004).

Prior to the 2008-2009 school year, student teachers typically spent their 10 service learning hours engaging in after school tutoring, coaching, advising a student organisation, or volunteering at sites such as the humane society or a home for senior citizens. While these are worthwhile endeavours they do not help prepare the candidates to become successful classroom teachers who can plan and implement challenging and motivating lessons for their pupils. Last year, rather than spending their hours volunteering, the student teachers were required to design and implement standards-based lessons that included service learning projects with their elementary students.

In 2008 the National Youth Leadership Council disseminated eight standards that were found to be linked to high quality service learning experiences in K-12 schools. These standards include: meaningful service, links to the curriculum, reflection, diversity, youth voice, partnerships, progress monitoring and duration/intensity (retrieved October 15, 2009, from <http://www.nylc.org/>). The standards also clarify how service learning differs from other forms of experiential learning at the elementary level. The assignment from the teacher candidates' syllabus is shown in Figure 1. It was structured to closely align with the first three, and in my view the most powerful, standards in that the candidates

were required to design a lesson or lessons that were linked to the state curriculum standards, included meaningful service, and engaged their students in a reflective activity.

Design a meaningful service learning experience that you can implement with your students. This experience may take place in the content area(s) of your choice and must be aligned with state curriculum standards. You must also engage your students in some form of reflection at the conclusion of their service learning experience.

On Monday of your last week of student teaching the following are due:

- Lesson plan(s)
- Work samples
- Reflection samples (or summary if done orally)
- A two page reflection

Figure 1: Service learning requirement from course syllabus

Participants and methodology

Participants included 50 elementary student teachers enrolled at a mid-size liberal arts university. All were in their early 20's; 45 were female, five were male, and all but two were Caucasian. Because of its clearly differentiated boundaries, a case study approach was utilised to investigate the effects of the experience on the teacher candidates and their students. Yin (1994) describes case studies "as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 13). Three data sources were utilised for this project:

- 1) The teacher candidates wrote open-ended, reflective papers about their experiences.
- 2) Artifacts including lesson plans, students' work samples and reflections were collected.
- 3) All 50 candidates participated in focus group meetings during the last week of the semester. Each meeting was attended by four to six candidates; these meeting were recorded and transcribed.

Data were analysed repeatedly with the intent of identifying and labeling emerging constructs and verifying the interpretation of the data through triangulation. Transferability, dependability and confirmability of findings was verified when I and another researcher independently coded an entry with the same construct (inter rater reliability was found to be above .95) and credibility was established when themes were identified from multiple data sources and participants (Merriam, 1998). For example, assignments completed by the elementary students demonstrating mastery of a lesson's objectives were used to verify a candidate's self-reported claim of a successful lesson

and topics mentioned in the reflective papers were supported by examining the transcriptions of the focus group meetings.

Findings

After the candidates written reflections, transcriptions of the focus group meetings, and the collected artifacts were analysed, five constructs were identified. These constructs are listed in Table 1. To be included, a construct must have been mentioned by a minimum of 20% of the candidates in their written reflections. Each construct listed is followed by the percentage of student teachers that mentioned that construct in their written reflection and the percentage of focus groups where least half of the members made a positive comment about that construct. Each of the six constructs will be discussed in turn.

Table 1: Constructs identified by teacher candidates in what they had learned about teaching

Construct	% Candidates who wrote about each construct (n=50)	% Focus Groups that positively discussed each construct (n=10)
Better prepared to teach	96	100
Numerous content areas can be integrated with SL	36	90
Candidates had positive experiences with SL	96	100
SL emphasises good citizenship	36	80
SL had positively effects student learning	42	100

Better prepared to teach

Each focus group meeting began by asking the candidates if they thought their experience using service learning as a teaching methodology had prepared them to be better teachers. Forty-eight responded in the affirmative. The following two quotes from Jon and Jamie (all names are pseudonyms) are typical:

This experience definitely prepared me to be a better teacher because it helped me realise ways I can include the community within my classroom. Doing community service projects motivates the students and that helped me see why doing these projects is important. I learned something new everyday during this experience which helped me grow in a professional manner. I learned about planning, instruction, management, communication and ways to grow as an educator.

This experience definitely prepared me to be a better teacher because it was my first opportunity to take sole responsibility of planning and teaching an entire unit that concluded with a great activity that allowed the students to give back to their community. The sense of accomplishment I felt at the end of the unit was a great feeling and I would love to be able to do similar projects with my students in the future.

April, one of the two dissenters said, "The experience allowed me to take a chance and try something new while still engaging with my students." Lori said, "I don't think this experience drastically prepared me to be a better teacher. It made me think in a different way about the importance of teaching others about how important it is to help others." Written reflections confirmed the oral responses above.

Content areas integration with SL

Data collected confirms that the teacher candidates were able to incorporate service learning into a variety of content areas including: language arts, science, social studies, math, and health. Many lessons incorporated more than one subject. One student wrote "This unit integrates writing, technology, reading trade books, art, and service learning. Because of the variety of assessments and teaching strategies involved with this unit, students of all learning abilities and levels were able to participate successfully." Table 2 lists the title, subject area(s), and a brief description of 10 randomly selected lessons implemented during the fall semester. Letter writing was the most popular project. Letters were sent to soldiers, senior citizens, young children and pen pals, addressing a wide variety of topics such as the importance of conserving water, ways to recycle, gratefulness, and in the case of the young children, advice on how to succeed in school.

The candidates also implemented a wide variety of reflection strategies including teacher led oral discussions, student led small group conversations, and journaling. Over half of the student teachers developed some form of survey. One example from a first grader is recreated in Figure 2. A journal entry from a struggling fifth grader is reproduced in Figure 3. Lesson plans and work samples further document that the candidates integration of service learning into their curricula.

Positive experiences for teachers with SL

Over one-third of the candidates reported in their written reflections and all of the focus groups positively discussed learning how to develop integrated lesson plans that included service-experiences while meeting standards for two or more content areas. Segments from two typical reflections from a sixth grade and a kindergarten student teacher respectively are quoted here.

I was surprised that I could teach so many things at one time. It was easy to integrate service learning, my science lesson, and a language arts lesson. After learning about electricity, rather than having a final exam, the students wrote brochures about how to be safe with electricity. Then we went to a second grade classroom and gave them to the students and talked with them about how electricity works. It was a great unit!

I was teaching about the importance of recycling. We read several books and I taught my students some songs. Then, we worked in centers to make posters to put around the school for the service learning part. They dictated what they wanted to say and then drew pictures. We even used recycled paper. Noble, one of my struggling students wrote: "We can make the earth better by throwing our garbage in the garbage can and

putting stuff to recycle in the blue can." I was so impressed by how much he remembered. I think it was because it was all real to them, something about their world.

All of the teacher candidates submitted lesson plans. All plans included objectives and links to multiple state standards.

Table 2: Sampling of projects from the fall 2008 semester

Grade	Curriculum	Service	Reflection type
K	Social Studies: diversity, poverty; Art: drawing	Designed Thanksgiving placemats for soup kitchen	Oral
1	Social Studies: Fire safety; career unit; Art: posters	Made Fire safety posters to hang around the school to inform other students about importance of fire safety	Survey
4	Math: Measurement, fractions; Social Studies: Immigration	Collected food and prepared a Thanksgiving dinner for needy immigrant family at their school	Survey
2	Science: Pollution, recycling; Math: Counting money	Started a recycling program at their school and raised money to purchase recycling bins	Survey
K	Science: Recycling; Art: Three dimensional spaces	Created 'junk' sculptures from recyclable materials	Oral
6	Science: Electricity, safety; Public speaking: Effective speeches; English: Research skills	Designed informational pamphlets about electric safety prepared speeches to make second graders aware of how to be safe around electricity	Journal
5	Health: Substance abuse; Language Arts: Persuasion, advertising	Prepared and posted anti drug/smoking/drinking posters	Oral
2	Language Arts: Persuasive letters	Organised school-wide Feed-A-Friend project	Survey
3	Language Arts: Writing process, friendly letters	Wrote pen pal letters to send to Pre-K students; became role models for the younger kids	Journal
4	Language Arts: Narrative texts, interviewing; Social Studies: Immigration, life histories	Interviewed senior citizens about their lives and holiday traditions, authored narratives based on their interviews and read papers to residences of a nearby nursing home.	Journal

Circle the number that best describes your feelings about the lesson and the activity you just participated in.

	No	Maybe	Yes
1. Would you want to do this again?	1	2	3
2. Did you find this lesson hard?	1	2	3
3. Did you find this lesson easy?	1	2	3
4. Name one thing you liked about this lesson. <i>I liked to make the cord.</i>			
5. What is one thing you learned from this lesson? <i>To help other people.</i>			

Figure 2: Sample of student reflection worksheet

I learned that being Philanthropist mean helping others. We did so many things to show I are philanthropist. I learned how to help our community. Shawn was in my community and needed our help. We worked together. It made me happy to see our money go to a person in need. I was happy to do this.

Figure 3: Open-ended reflection completed by a struggling fifth grader

Citizenship

All of the focus groups discussed the power service learning has to prepare children to become better citizens. The candidates felt that their students had learned about the importance of helping those in need. Mary wrote, "The students [first graders] learned that helping people who don't have money for food can be fun. It made us all feel good." Sue, who taught in a third grade classroom noted, "I learned that I can teach my students about the importance of making a difference in this world. This will prepare them to help others throughout their lives." Christina said:

I think the kids learned how to, honestly, I think they learned some life lessons. They learned to be respectful...They really did learn so much but I just don't know how to explain it. When they left [the nursing home] that day, they were different people because they hadn't done anything like that before, you can just tell and see on their faces that something had changed...

During the focus group meetings the candidates were genuinely surprised that they could find time to help prepare their students to be better citizens today's classrooms given the enormous pressure on teachers to prepare their students to pass standardised tests.

Positive effects on student learning

Candidates also reported in their written reflections what they had learned about using service learning as a teaching methodology. Almost half of the candidates reported that

their students really benefited from the opportunity to actively help their community and the real life nature of their service learning experiences writing comments such as:

It was so wonderful to see my students out in public. When they shared the poems they had written with the senior citizens they were so proud. They really implemented the writing process to make their poems the best. Using service learning is something I will definitely use in my own classroom.

It was great. They loved it. They even loved the classroom things, like the book on bald eagles, I was shocked to see how much they enjoyed it...it really touched them, I was really surprised...They learned the importance of the Earth and how you can impact it and how you can help by conserving water, things like that. Just them as individuals how not to litter and pick up.

Forty-two percent reported that including a service learning component in a lesson plan was very motivating for their pupils. The following two comments were typical.

I have never seen my students work so hard as they did on this. The students really learned a lot from writing letters that were actually going to be read by someone. They revised and edited with out complaining for the first time all year. Even my cooperating teacher was impressed. She told me that she will do this again next year.

When they learned that the food they were collecting was going to the homeless shelter they asked me if they could prepare a meal for the shelter. I asked them what they thought they would learn and they listed all kinds things. They even wanted to write cards to go with the meal.

Similar comments were echoed by all 10 of the focus groups indicating that the candidates found service learning to be a powerful methodology for engaging their students and increasing student learning.

Perhaps, most importantly, 100% of the candidates self-reported that their students had mastered the objectives listed on their lesson plans. Student work samples verified these statements. In fact, several candidates provided test results supporting their claim that this was the most successful lesson of their semester. One wrote: "Finally we had an exam. The students received the highest overall average grade for this test than any other test they had taken [this year] and the remembered the content much longer." Reflections completed by the children (examples previous shown in Figures 2 and 3) also confirmed that the students not only enjoyed the experience but believed they had learned about helping others.

Conclusions

During the focus group meetings, all 50 of the teacher candidates expressed pride in the lessons they had designed and implemented. In fact, 20% indicated it was the highlight of their student teaching experience. Many stated that their cooperating teachers would be repeating their lesson the following year. Several commented on the fact that they were able to teach their cooperating teacher about service learning. When asked if the university should continue to require student teachers to use service learning in their

classrooms rather than as 10 hours of additional volunteering, all but one responded in the affirmative.

Several limitations to this research exist. Data was only collected during one year from a relatively small sample of student teachers at one university. More data needs to be collected and analysed to verify the findings. Although every effort was made to ensure honesty on the part of the teacher candidates, all had been my students in previous years and that may have biased the finding. While I did not teach the student teaching course or play any part in grading the candidates work they all knew me so it was impossible for them to remain anonymous.

All 50 of the lessons designed by the teacher candidates were self-reported as successful. While self-reported findings may be considered suspect this finding is important from a self-efficacy perspective. For teacher candidates to continue to implement new teaching practices they must possess a strong sense of self-efficacy (Seely & Baloch, 2001); self-efficacy is developed through successful teaching experiences (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). The fact that the candidates viewed their lessons as successful may lead to a continuation of this methodology as first year teachers.

This group of student teachers discovered that service learning was a powerful methodology on many levels. Not only did they note increases in student learning, they felt it was an important tool in preparing their students for success. Elizabeth, who struggled throughout her student teaching placement, spoke for her group when she noted: "I have been a person for others and I will continue serving others and hopefully I will pass this on to my children and students...little did we know after hours of planning and preparing our service would touch so many hearts!"

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