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Designing Teacher Education Course Syllabi That Integrate Service-Learning

BYLINE: Michael Rowls and Kevin J. Swick

Sample service-learning in teacher education course syllabi are analyzed in relation to important variables impacting the value and use of this pedagogy in teacher education courses and experiences. Results of the analysis – as interrelated with the findings of other service-learning research – point to possible means for strengthening the design and uses of service-learning in teacher education. Guidelines for strengthening service-learning within teacher education courses are presented and discussed.

Service-learning (SL) is an experientially based pedagogy that is ideally suited to educating teachers (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). As a teaching methodology, SL attempts to involve learners in community service experiences that are meaningfully interrelated with particular learning goals. Service-learning enhances students by giving them opportunities to explore, study, acquire and apply skills as well as examine problems and issues in a reflective way. Service-learning in teacher education is usually focused on one or more of the following goal areas (Swick et al., 1998):

- Enhancing students' through career exploration activities where they can examine the many dimensions of relating to people in different teaching-learning contexts.
- Enriching students' introduction to educational contexts and issues through meaningful service involvement in community settings where children, young people, and adults pursue educational activities.
- Assisting students in acquiring and practicing various instructional, methodology, and curriculum strategies in disciplines appropriate to their studies.
- Engaging students in learning about and using the SL pedagogy in diverse and multicultural contexts.

In addition, SL is used to foster advocacy, research, critical analysis, and collaboration skills and dispositions relevant to being an effective teacher. Teacher educators use various means to integrate service-learning into students' learning experiences and thus achieve the diverse goals previously noted. The most common means used is through the integration of SL into teacher education course requirements.

The purpose of this paper is to review selected teacher education course syllabi used in relation to important teaching and learning factors: time requirements, grade value, types and location of SL activities, course descriptions of SL, SL project descriptions, related means of SL course integration, and evaluation of SL projects and activities. In addition, the findings of this analysis are then synthesized in relation to guidelines teacher educators can use as they design SL components in their courses.

The context of this analysis was the "model" service-learning in teacher education course syllabi shared at the 51st Annual Meeting and Exhibits Program of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education held in Washington, DC in 1999. The 11 course syllabi provided an opportunity to analyze these syllabi in relation to what some programs are doing with SL in their teacher education courses. Of the 11 syllabi reviewed:

- Four were for basic or generic introductory courses in education;
- Six syllabi were designed for upper-level, specific area methodology courses (mostly elementary social studies, language arts, and special education methods); and

- One course syllabus was for a methods course in SL itself. The results of the analysis of these syllabi are presented in relation to the varied dimensions of service-learning.

Service-Learning Time Requirements and Grade Value

The amount of time spent in service-learning and the manner in which that time is organized appear to influence the value of SL as a learning experience. Further, the grade value given to the SL part of a course is likely to influence student motivation and performance (Lipka, 1995; Root, 1997; Shumer, 1997). In the course syllabi reviewed, introductory and more generic courses including a SL requirement were generally vague about the number of hours required; only two course syllabi stated the hour requirement, which ranged from 30 to 50 hours. Three of the four courses stated the percentage of the final course grade that the SL requirement fulfilled, and this ranged from 40% to 50% of the final grade.

Of the remaining course syllabi (one for service-learning methods and the rest for specific area methods), half indicated a time requirement for the SL component of the course; these ranged from 12 to 25 hours. Half of the syllabi in this group stated a final grade percentage value for the SL course component, ranging from 20% to 50% of the final course grade. Only one syllabus that was reviewed had neither time requirements nor final grade value of the SL component.

Just two course syllabi made reference to time blocks and the nature of the scheduling of SL visitations. One of the specific-area methods courses indicated one hour per week time blocks over the course of 15 weeks. An additional course syllabus described a time period of six days that was set aside for all students to engage in and complete their SL work. No additional syllabi made reference to time block length or scheduling.

Types and Locations of Service-Learning Activities

Developing a "match" between desired learning outcomes and the types and contexts of service-learning are especially important in teacher education (Waterman, 1997). In this study, the course syllabi for introductory and generic education courses for the most part do not describe expectations for students' SL activities with respect to the general type of service-learning (direct, indirect, or advocacy). Only one syllabus in this group clearly defined the SL component as direct. This syllabus and one other described the general context in which SL work was to be accomplished, with one focusing on school-based placement and the other explicitly suggesting non-school community service agency placement. None of the syllabi in this group indicated that student-proposed SL projects were acceptable.

One third of the remaining course syllabi had no reference to type of SL activity. The other two thirds were split between direct SL and the possibility of students doing either direct or indirect SL work. Again, two thirds of the syllabi in this group made mention of non-school (preK-12) SL placements, typically referring to community service agencies. One third of the syllabi in this group specified school-based SL placements, usually in the context of a school-based "practicum" requirement. Half of the syllabi in this group explicitly indicated that students could propose their own service-learning projects and placements.

With regard to the nature of the SL activity, little was communicated in either group of syllabi. The most often mentioned specific activity in which students were expected to engage during their SL work was literacy tutoring.

Course Descriptions of Service-Learning Activities

As noted above, the specific nature of the SL activity is, understandably, seldom described in any detail in the course syllabi. There are, however, attendant course goals, objectives, and descriptions that give the SL activities required of students a context and more general clarity

One basic-level education course we reviewed contained the following SL-related objective: "The student is expected to engage in civic activities that influence the lives of children." Another expressed the service-learning component in terms of the student goal to, "describe how SL can be used as a

philosophy and pedagogy ... [and] ... how it can be used to meet the diverse learning styles and needs of the students involved in the project."

The remaining basic-level education course syllabi did not mention or describe the SL component via course objectives/ goals. Through course descriptions and procedural information, however, the required SL activities were made clearer; for example, one basic course provided "service guidelines" in the syllabus that imparted useful context and strategy information for students: "View the agency mentors and the recipients of the service as teachers, with the college student playing the role of learner" (The same course advised students to "refrain from chewing gum ... and smoking when completing the service requirement").

An additional basic-level course detailed in the syllabus the "13 characteristics of the Active Community Member," then consistently linked this concept of community to schools and classrooms. Two of the basic courses contained little to no description of the SL component via course objectives or other descriptions of course requirements and activities (note: these courses did provide additional insight into the SL components in other ways).

Across a variety of elementary and special education methods courses, as well as one service-learning methodology course, the accompanying course descriptions yield a great deal of contextual information. A reading methods course stated,

"[This course is for] assisting children to feel connected to the community through service to others ... [and to] ... develop and implement a personal service-learning project ... tutoring (in literacy) an individual at a local community agency ... [and to] ... engage children at the elementary level in developing a service-learning project for the community."

A social studies methods syllabus describes the course in this way:

"Social studies should give students opportunities to contribute actively to their school life and to the larger community ... [by] ... connecting to the larger community through meaningful, hands-on involvement ... [and] ...consistent responsible participation in the community service-learning project."

Selected course objectives furnish more insight into the nature of the service-learning experience(s) that is planned for and expected of students:

- To increase awareness of community resources which enables you to expand instruction by making examples and experiences relevant to students' lives.
- Demonstrate an understanding of service-learning as a pedagogical strategy by developing and implementing a personal service-learning project [this objective was further linked to state beginning teacher standards].
- To develop, organize, implement, and assess a service-learning action research project that integrates and applies course content in ways that strengthen homeless students' school success potential.

Within a framework that emphasized the "social responsibilities of teaching, " the service-learning methods course advanced the following objectives:

- [Students are expected to] develop and demonstrate a commitment to community service in their own lives.
- Appreciate the importance and power of service-learning in helping students develop self-esteem, civic responsibility, empathy for others, and higher order thinking skills.
- Demonstrate knowledge of elements of high-quality service-learning.

- Additional objectives indicated that students were to integrate SL into classroom lessons, identify community resources for SL, work with K-12 students in implementing SL, and observe SL mentors.

The common theme in these course descriptions was that of linking the service-learning to particular course goals, content, and activities. Indeed one of the criteria for meaningful service-learning is the clear and useful connection between course substance and the SL experiences (Erickson & Anderson, 1997).

Service-Learning Requirements and Descriptions

Specificity with regard to the role of reflective activities and related learning expectations increase the potential for students to have successful service-learning (Ogden & Claus, 1997; Wade & Yarbrough, 1996). Our review of the course descriptions included the elements of reflection and SL course assignment descriptions.

Reflections: Every course reviewed, regardless of level, made mention of the necessity of student "reflection." Sometimes, these reflections were cast as required written assignments in which students were to reflect upon what they learned in the context of their SL activities. At other times, the reflections were integrated into larger projects or assignments. Often, the act of reflection was described in such a way as to make it stand out as one of the most important student response modes built into the course. And while actual student reflections may have been provided students in the courses themselves, only one syllabus presented actual examples of student reflections. Guiding questions were used in one syllabus in elementary social studies methods, providing the following questions to guide students' reflections about their SL work:

1. What did you learn about yourself as a teacher?
2. What "teacher skills" did you need to use in this SL project?
3. What knowledge or abilities did you develop as a result of working on the SL project?
4. What skills or abilities do you now recognize that you need to develop?
5. How did your experiences in this project change your views of children or families?
6. How might what you learned about social issues or community agencies impact your future teaching of elementary social studies?
7. How can you apply what you learned about community service-learning to your future teaching of elementary social studies?

Assignment Guides: The majority of the courses reviewed contained additional insight regarding the nature of and expectations for students' completion of the SL requirements via ancillary journal, portfolio, and project descriptions. A reading methods course described the required components of the SL project and subsequent report in terms of what students were to include:

1. A description of the community agency
2. A discussion on how you selected this community agency
3. A plan of your project including:
 - Description of individual [who was tutored]
 - Two running records including determination of reading level
 - Other informal assessment tools>analysis of individual's needs
 - Description of two activities used to address needs
 - Evaluation of individual' s performance on activities

- Reflection on why you selected the two activities
4. Personal reflections(s) on your SL project
 5. Description of your celebration
 6. Evaluation of the project
 7. A discussion on what is service-learning and how it can enhance the teaching learning process in schools.

Other types of assignment guides appended to or integrated in syllabi included a two page "Service-Learning Curriculum Design Project" guide, an eight page "Community Service-learning Handbook," a "Pre-service Teacher Service-learning Guidebook," and a "Service and Service-learning Project Application" guide. These more detailed SL assignment guides additionally contained rationales and statements of benefits regarding the required SL activities, placement information and options, and in some instances information regarding the evaluation of students' SL work. It should be noted that all of these extended descriptions of the SL requirements appeared in specific-area methods courses; none of the basic education courses integrated or appended these lengthier explanations of the SL component.

The service-learning methods course appended the most complete set of guiding questions for helping students understand both the service-learning project they were to do, as well as the significant elements that must be considered in a high-quality service-learning experience. Within a framework of outcomes, planning, and assessment, the following questions in the "Service-learning Action Plan" to assist students in understanding service-learning as an instructional methodology:

1. In what ways will your students serve the school, peers and community?
2. What learning objectives or outcomes have you identified that the service project will address?
3. What information do you need to implement your project? Where can you get it?
4. How will you involve students in planning so they have ownership of the project?
5. How will you prepare students so they have the skills they need to be successful with the project?
6. How will you facilitate students' reflection?
7. Do you anticipate having to deal with the issue of liability? Please explain.
8. What problems/challenges do you foresee?
9. What assistance will you need?
10. Do you anticipate needing any funds to cover costs of the SL project? How do you expect to raise those funds?
11. How will students' service efforts be recognized?
12. How will you determine what your students have gained from participation in the project?
13. How will you assess the impact of the project on the community?
14. If students are graded on their SL project, how will you determine the grade?

Other Examples of Integration of Service-learning into Courses

The prior discussion has described a number of specific ways SL was integrated into the course syllabi reviewed. Other modes of integration were used, as well. Discussion and individual/group presentations regarding students' SL work and experiences were common across most syllabi. Some syllabi evidenced topical integration; for example, one course syllabus referenced service-learning in four specific class sessions, relating it to citizenship, democracy, and instructional models. One course referenced an end-of-semester "Service-Learning Conference" where students were required to present their SL projects

and attend the presentations of others. Two courses integrated technology through the use of listservs and requirements for students to post messages related to their service-learning experiences and activities.

Evaluation of the Service-Learning Project/Activity

Evaluating students' SL work is a multidimensional process. As cited above, a variety of written formats are employed in the business of soliciting students' responses to and reflections about their service-learning experiences. Journals, service-learning project descriptions, portfolios, summaries, diaries all provide opportunities for course designers to include what often amounts to an assessment rubric for whatever written requirement is stated in the syllabi. These SL project descriptions are typically in outline form, comprised of guiding statements or questions, and imply a yes/no evaluation decision in the absence of a more extensive scoring procedure--which is understandable in the context of a course syllabus (see examples). A three-part format offered in one of the elementary methods courses consisted of:

Page 1 - Introduction: An "attention-getting" cover including basic information about the project, what the student did, the agency and individuals where the project took place.
Page 2 - What we did: A detailing of activities and/or services completed, along with relevant artifacts (e.g., pictures, etc.).
Page 3 - What I learned: An extended reflection including description of experiences and skills acquired, perspective changes about self as teacher, insights about children, as well as a range of topics revolving around community service and service-learning.

Noting again that the typical course syllabus does not carry a great deal of information about student assessment and evaluation, we were pleased to find an exception to that rule. The service-learning methods course had the only syllabus that communicated explicitly information about assessment criteria. Using a scale of "always, often, sometimes, rarely, not applicable/ observable," the assessment form focused on seven dimensions of performance regarding service-learning:

1. Demonstrates knowledge of standards of effective service-learning.
2. Takes initiative in planning and carrying out service activities.
3. Communicates regularly and clearly with all people involved in the service project.
4. Follows through on agreed on commitments and responsibilities.
5. Displays enthusiasm and a positive attitude toward service-learning project.
6. Employs appropriate interpersonal skills to relate well with teacher, students, and community members.
7. Demonstrates organizational skills necessary to conduct a service-learning project.

Guidelines for Integrating Service-Learning into Teacher Education Course Syllabi

Based on our review of the 11 course syllabi and the literature related to meaningful service-learning in teacher education, several guidelines are noted that should prove useful for teacher educators interested in integrating SL into their courses.

Clear Statement of Purpose: Students, faculty, and community users of SL need written clarity of the purpose of service-learning in relation to the course and in relation to the functions it should play in the community (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). A clear statement of purpose establishes the parameters of what is to be accomplished, how it should occur, and thus provides students and community mentors alike with direction in their planning and implementation efforts.

Connection to Course and the Community: It is also critical that course syllabi include information on the linkages between service-learning, the course goals, and the service activities being performed in the community. Consonance between and among the service being performed, content being studied, and the desired learning outcomes enhance the value of specific academic SL efforts (Bass-Scott & Silverstein, 1996).

Nature of Service-learning Time Requirements:

The implementation of SL is enhanced when course information clearly delineates the expected time requirements (Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997). Questions that may help faculty structure this element of SL are: What are the total number of hours required? How are these hours to be scheduled? Additional time requirement issues should be clearly stated in the course syllabi. Student decisions related to enrolling in a course are likely to be influenced by the time factor.

Grade Value and Evaluation Criteria: Critical to the credibility of the service-learning part of a course is the value it is given in the final grading system. To expect students to invest heavily in SL and yet minimize its actual value in the grading scheme is likely to defeat the goal of having meaningful student SL involvement (Waterman, 1997). Further, the criteria by which service-learning performance is to be evaluated should be clearly stated and meaningfully related to the actual SL tasks performed.

Types of Service and the Location: Different types of service (direct, indirect, advocacy) meet particular course goals (Root, 1997). For example, advocacy activities or action-research projects may be valuable in a child and family development course but inappropriate in a specific methods course. Course syllabi should convey the type of service expected and specifics on the when and where of the SL. Likewise, details on the location of service sites, designated site coordinators, and related information on the relationship between services performed, needs being met at the sites, and course substance greatly enhance the value and function of SL (Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997). Provisions for transportation or alternate service sites are important to the success of student SL.

Student Involvement in Determining Needs and Service Strategies: Meaningful SL is the result of a partnership among the parties designing and benefiting from the service-learning process. While the nature of academic courses is somewhat confining in this regard, faculty should optimize student participation in determining needs to be addressed, services to be implemented, and other dimensions of the SL effort (Swick et al., 1999).

Nature of the Service-learning Activities: Rich descriptions of the nature of the SL to be performed will increase student understanding of what to expect, how to be effective, and how they can relate their SL to course goals (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). For example, if specific kinds of activities are required they should be highlighted and thoroughly explained. Further, wherever possible clarify the connection between SL activities and course topics.

Reflection Activities: One of the most critical attributes of meaningful SL is the reflective process. Hatcher and Bringle (1997) see reflection as the process that helps learners link service to their course goals. Syllabi should articulate the following elements of reflection:

- The role that reflection should play in the SL.
- How the reflection process will work in terms of:
 - Recording SL experiences,
 - Sharing and discussion of experiences, and
 - Culminating reflection activities.
- The part that reflection activities will play in the evaluation and grading scheme.

Service-learning Assignment Guides: Providing students with specific guidance on the nature and function of SL course requirements through the development of course-specific SL guides further enhances their experience. Information such as the following is essential (Stacey, Rice, & Langer, 1997):

- Purpose of specific SL activities.
- Instructions on how SL journals and portfolios are to be organized and used.
- Suggestions on how to do specific SL assignments.
- Information on contact persons at SL sites including phone numbers and directions to the sites.

Teacher educators using service-learning have also noted the value of providing community site supervisors with copies of SL syllabi and guides. Gaining continual feedback from site supervisors and from students is helpful in continually updating and refining service-learning course materials. Service-learning can be used effectively in various teacher education courses and clinical settings when the important variables of purpose, context, time, activity descriptions, supervision, reflection and analysis procedures, and related support factors are addressed.

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