

2000

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Kevin J. Swick

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

Michael Rowls

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*

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## Recommended Citation

Swick, Kevin J. and Rowls, Michael, "The Voices of Preservice Teachers on the Meaning and Value of Their Service-Learning" (2000). *Higher Education*. Paper 107.

<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcehighered/107>

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# THE “VOICES” OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS ON THE MEANING AND VALUE OF THEIR SERVICE-LEARNING

KEVIN J. SWICK

*College of Education*

MICHAEL ROWLS

*College of Education*

*University of South Carolina*

*Columbia, South Carolina 29208*

The perspectives of preservice teacher education students about their service-learning experiences are examined in the context of Serow's conceptual scheme of competence, participation, relationships, and understanding. 240 undergraduates in education and 59 professional program interns participated in the study. Their responses to a service learning survey suggest that service learning positively influences them in relation to personal, professional, academic, and career functioning. The student “voice” on service-learning provides many insights on ways to strengthen S-L in teacher education.

Service-learning (S-L) is being promoted as an empowering pedagogy in teacher education that engages teachers and learners in putting their educational pursuits to work on behalf of the community (Swick & Rowls, 1999). Quality service-learning requires the participants to: assess and determine community needs in partnership with the people they are serving; design service activities that meaningfully respond to these needs; carry out the identified service; and reflect and synthesize the pertinent outcomes of the effort for future work (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). Learners integrate the entire S-L process into their academic learning, thus creating the potential for a transformational relationship between the learner and the community (Waterman, 1997). In effect, service-learning should empower future teachers to function dynamically in their educational and leadership roles, thus strengthening children, young people, and their families in their efforts to achieve

educational and life success (Swick & Rowls, 1999).

The Service-Learning and Teacher Education Project (USC - SLATE) at the University of South Carolina integrated the S-L paradigm into several facets of its teacher education program. This integration process is ongoing with individual faculty experimenting with S-L in their courses, the inclusion of S-L in selected courses in the education minor program, and the carrying out of research and development activities by faculty and students. The emphasis in this report is on describing three facets of the USC SLATE project: 1) providing a brief description of the kinds of service-learning that teacher education students accomplish; 2) reporting on students' reflections on the meaning and value of their service-learning; and 3) putting forth implications of the students' views of S-L for creating truly empowering service-learning in teacher education. In addition, particular guidelines for crafting

effective service-learning experiences are presented. While the students' "voices" are the primary focus of the data shared in this paper, faculty assessments and observations, as well data from the SLATE literature are also shared.

#### **Sample Service - Learning Accomplishments By Students**

Teacher education students at the University of South Carolina experience S-L in various courses and in diverse school and community settings. All students in the "Education Minor" take a course in Community Service in which service-learning is the main focus of the course. Students also do S-L as a part of other required and elective courses in the education minor and during the professional program.

The service-learning design used in the USC Teacher Education Program emphasizes S-L activities that promote student achievement in the four behavioral categories that Serow (1997) indicates effective service-learning should promote: competence, participation, relationships, and understanding. While these behavioral categories are interactive and interrelated, an example of service-learning used to strengthen student knowledge and skills in each category is explicated.

#### *Competence Example*

As Serow (1997) notes, competence refers to the "skills" a person acquires in the process of doing S-L. A common service-learning activity most USC teacher education students experience is that of tutoring a child. They may work with an individual child or a small group of chil-

dren on academic subjects like math or more general homework tasks. Skills learned or strengthened might include instructional techniques, teacher-child interaction skills, and related affective perspectives toward teaching itself. In addition, students acquire "career assessment" knowledge they use in reflecting on and making decisions about teaching as a career. For example, one student noted:

"I had never really related to children in a teaching setting prior to this experience. The service-learning really enhanced my understanding of the need to be patient, sensitive, and supportive of children as they are learning new skills. Also, I realized that working with young children is something I really like - previously I thought of myself as mainly teaching middle school children."

#### *Participation Example*

The key emphasis in this behavioral area is on "involvement" in doing service-learning in relation to factors such as being reliable, following through on agreements, and being attentive to doing a quality job. For example, USC Early Childhood Teacher Education students do S-L at the Children's Garden which is a preschool program for homeless children. The children need consistent loving care from adults who are with them on a continuing basis. Thus, student attendance and follow through on their commitments to the children is critical to the effectiveness of their participation and involvement. The

students realize this and often comment in their journals about the impact they have on a child because they are consistently engaged with the child in positive and nurturing ways. In effect, they learn that being reliable is a part of the quality relationship they are forming with the child. These same students often note that their consistent participation in S-L increases their personal sense of accomplishment; completing tasks thoroughly and in a quality manner become not only characteristic of their participation, but demonstrate qualities of competence as well.

#### *Relationship Example*

Service-learning experiences are rich in relationship learning possibilities. Teacher education students at the University of South Carolina are intentionally involved in S-L experiences that are culturally diverse, providing them with different mentors and supervisors, and encouraging them to reflect on their relationship skills and perspectives. For example, the diversity of situations faced in community S-L often requires more sophisticated relationship skills and perspectives than do traditional school placements made in practica or internships. In working at a program for homeless children and families university students must respond to variables such as parent stress, the special needs of the child as related to beyond school stressors, and various community influences that impact child and family. Thus, S-L participants must be skilled in understanding individual child needs and be prepared to work with several adults of varying backgrounds. Initially some students express frustration in try-

ing to relate to a child and/or parent who differs greatly from them regarding values and life orientation. Through reflection opportunities in class and in individual consultation with instructors, they can compare their perspectives with other students and with guest speakers from the community, and thus gain information for reconstructing their ideas about people different from themselves (Wade & Anderson, 1996). In a S-L reflection journal a student commented:

“I really gained a better perspective about relating to children different from me when our group shared their various S-L experiences. I realized that I was trying to see the children within one mental framework - mine! Now I can see that each child comes from a unique position in life. My S-L has really helped me to relate to all children more effectively.”

#### *Understanding Example*

Two dimensions of “understanding” are emphasized in S-L: gaining insight into the value of continued service to the community, and acquisition of knowledge and skills in using S-L as an instructional approach in teaching. These understandings are highlighted in one student’s service-learning journal entry on doing field trip work as a part of her S-L in a kindergarten classroom.

“I had no idea of the role I would play in planning a field trip to the Ocean for 22 kindergarten children.

My mentor teacher engaged me in every part of the process from planning the key content things we wanted the children to learn - to calling and involving parents in this field trip process. My teacher said "this is the best field trip we have had in several years due to your work and effort; you have made the difference in my being able to spend more time with individual children and parents who can really benefit from my attention." I can see now that service in this school impacts the families too! It creates a totally new classroom learning setting. I am a really key part of this group of children's lives and I am a really valuable asset to this teacher. I will serve in many capacities in the future; I enjoy it and learn greatly from it.

During classroom discussion time, students explore the key elements of S-L as an instructional strategy and approach, using their service-learning experiences as a basis for expanding their understanding of service-learning. The above example (S-L help in the kindergarten) is used to explore how service-learning is organized, linked to academic learning, developed in response to a community need and school learning, implemented in collaborative ways, and continually refined to strengthen it as a teaching tool. Students are then asked to develop a hypothetical S-L activity that includes all of these elements. These activities are shared in class and organized into a S-L teaching resource guide the students can use throughout their

professional program.

### **Student Perspectives on the Value and Meaning of Their Service-Learning**

How do students involved in S-L perceive their service-learning experiences? Student reflections and perceptions on the meaning and value of their service-learning was acquired through surveying 240 undergraduates who had recently completed S-L as a part of their teacher education courses and 59 professional program interns just completing their final internship. Students were asked several questions related to how they viewed their service-learning experiences, what they felt they gained from their experiences, and their views on what comprised quality S-L. The results of the student survey data were related to the behavioral areas of learning that Serow (1991) suggests S-L should seek to nurture in students. Further, these results were then integrated into our discussion of the implications of "student voices" in shaping service learning experiences that are meaningful and challenging to teacher education students.

### *How Service-Learning Can Promote Student Competence*

A majority of the students (92 percent of the undergraduates and 60 percent of professional program interns) viewed their S-L work as meeting important community needs. These students believe they gained new skills, particularly in learning more about the field of teaching. The professional program interns also noted that they gained increased competence in specific teaching skills as in classroom management, lesson planning, and deal-

the special needs of students. The students noted, however, that for service-learning to be a competence promoting experience the service had to be well designed and related to meeting authentic community needs. Also, analysis of student survey responses revealed that the more time students put in on S-L, the more they also perceived the experience as being substantive and worthwhile to them and to the community. In effect, they had time to fully engage in the service activity. The more positively students viewed their S-L, the more pronounced was their sense that it had increased their self-confidence in their abilities. Thus, service-learning is most likely to enhance learner competence when it is well designed, meeting authentic community needs, and substantively linked to academic learning goals (Erickson & Anderson, 1997).

In narrative reflections, students expressed that service-learning enhanced their competence in various ways: career exploration information, increased self confidence in helping and caring abilities, and attainment of specific instructional skills. They also noted the value of learning about how S-L is organized and integrated into academic learning skills they can use throughout their teaching careers.

#### *How Service-Learning Can Strengthen Students' Participation Skills*

How do students in teacher education see their participation in service-learning activities? Our survey results show that 94 percent of the undergraduates and 76 percent of the professional program interns believed that they were full participants in their S-L; they saw their part in the S-L as

active and influential in achieving the desired results of the service. Further, 70 percent of the undergraduates and 57 percent of the professional program interns viewed themselves as being "highly involved" in their S-L; they perceived their involvement to be very influential in the service contexts where they worked. Interestingly, the students who did not see their participation in S-L as effective were the students who noted that their S-L was not well organized or coordinated. Some students noted that participation skills are actually degraded in S-L settings that are poorly planned and/or poorly monitored.

Participation skills were also enhanced when the S-L had meaningful reflection opportunities during class sessions. Meaningful connections between course academic goals and the S-L placement strengthens the overall participation skills of the students (Waterman, 1997). Two thirds of those students surveyed said that S-L had enhanced their academic performance. Analysis of student narrative comments pointed to the importance of a quality S-L experience. Students who had positive S-L involvement cited the high quality of the S-L mentor, very strong coordination and linkage to course goals, and the continuous feedback they received from the people they were working with in the S-L activity.

#### *How Service-Learning Can Promote Student Relationship Skills*

Student survey results indicate that the responsibilities students are given in S-L, the sense of caring they develop in doing S-L, and their overall relationship with the supervisors in the S-L context strong-

S-L, and their overall relationship with the supervisors in the S-L context strongly influence their perceptions of their S-L experiences. Eighty to 90 percent of the undergraduate students in this study reported that their S-L work helped them to develop a sense of caring. Three fourths of these same students said S-L had a very strong effect on their caring skills. Similarly, both the undergraduates (90 percent) and the professional program interns (70 percent) said that their S-L had strengthened their professional relationship skills and that they had gained skill in how to function as professional educators in different settings with children from diverse backgrounds.

Students felt that S-L involvement had increased their sensitivity to students with special needs, made them more understanding of people culturally different from themselves, and more patient and sensitive to the general needs of all students. One student noted:

I really feel like I am more skilled in handling conflict situations. Several of the middle school students I worked with had pretty negative attitudes but I showed them positive alternatives to solving problems. I think I taught them a lot more than just math. And, I came out of this with much more sensitivity to being patient and being a good listener.

*How Service-Learning Can Strengthen Students' Understanding and Learning*

An important premise for connecting service and learning resides in students'

conception of community service as a legitimate avenue for personal and professional growth, as well as an empowering process for maintaining healthy communities (Kinsley, 1993). This recognition of the value of S-L as a valuable learning mode was validated in this study with 90 percent of the students reporting that S-L experiences in courses had increased their level of community volunteer activity. Students also noted that they now had a better understanding of the community, its needs, strengths, and potential for becoming an even better place to live.

Student understanding and learning of how to use S-L as a teaching method was also enhanced. Eighty to 90 percent of the students in this study said they would be more likely to use service-learning methods in their own teaching, and 75 percent of them indicated very strong commitment to using S-L as an instructional methodology. Unfortunately, this commitment to using S-L in teaching decreased as the grade level one was preparing to teach in increased; students preparing for secondary education were much less likely to say they would use S-L in their teaching.

Student reflection about their S-L experience is critical to their understanding and learning (Waterman, 1997). In this study, 95 percent of the undergraduates and 90 percent of the interns indicated that they had been given sufficient opportunity to reflect about their experiences in S-L placements. The vast majority of the students and interns also noted they did both written and oral reflections, on site and in the university classroom. Students strongly valued the reflection opportunities as means to more clearly link S-L to acade-

encourage students to examine their service in relation to formal course goals is a distinguishing feature of S-L.

### **Implications of Student Perceptions on the Value and Meaning of S-L for Teacher Education**

Service-learning, in the perspectives of the preservice teachers in this study, has some empowering attributes that teacher education should examine and integrate into course and program activities. These attributes provide a basis for transforming key aspects of the teacher education experience by making it a more meaningful, substantive, and community-centered learning opportunity.

For example, students viewed effective S-L as an experience that addresses an important community need. Indeed, the literature on S-L emphasizes this attribute as one of the defining characteristics of service-learning in contrast to more traditional school-based practicum situations (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). One of the “most positive” features of doing service-learning according to the students in this study was their sense of contributing to the community in significant ways. In more traditional practicum contexts the needs are often contrived, or mainly defined by the whims of the supervising mentor. Students liked being a part of the needs identification process, having input on how they could help meet specific needs, and being “partners” with their mentors in the planning and reflection process. As one student noted in her narrative, “I never felt like I was just filling up space; I was treated like a very important person who had good ideas. I always felt like my ideas were

valid, respected, and indeed used!” It is very important to students that they “made a difference” in the lives of others. Teacher educators would do well to re-think the value of traditional practicum where student involvement lacks the total immersion of students in partnership processes where they assess, plan, and commit themselves to making a difference in the lives of other people (Myers & Pickeral, 1997).

Another rewarding attribute of S-L identified by these students was their involvement with individual children and adults in ways that engaged them in serving, learning, and developing caring relations with the people they served. While traditional practicum settings may allow for this close, nurturing relationship, they typically do not invite this type of engagement because it is more group oriented, and more focused on simply introducing students to the basis of particular teaching contexts. In the S-L context, one is more likely to develop “ownership” in mentoring a child, more likely to assist a teacher who really needs help, and more likely to experience children’s and family’s reality as in helping families with evening homework tasks at a local shelter. These are rich contexts for helping preservice teachers to develop confidence in their interaction skills and to develop close connections to the school, shelter, or other community groups. Further, in authentic helping relationships, students are more open to learning from their mentors and from those they are helping. While the school-based “professional” training roles are certainly important in teacher education, the volunteer S-L involvement of students changes the role context to that of a more mean-

teacher education, the volunteer S-L involvement of students changes the role context to that of a more meaningful human caring process. Future teachers need to see themselves in caring, nonauthoritarian roles where they are intimately connected to children and young people as caring persons.

#### **Service-Learning: Guidelines from Student Reflections**

Data acquired from student reflections on their service-learning also indicate that to be meaningful, S-L must have particular qualities. The students point to the following as essential:

- \* Access to meaningful service-learning placements where needs and expectations are clearly articulated.
- \* Clear linkages between course goals and service-learning activities.
- \* Opportunities to reflect about the S-L experience with peers, faculty and on-site staff.
- \* Close partnering and communication between faculty and S-L site staff.
- \* Overall time requirement and the need for “friendly” scheduling opportunities.
- \* Opportunities for students to have input on the structure and nature of their service-learning.
- \* Ongoing feedback on their service-learning performance and impact that it may be having on their clients.
- \* Planned and meaningful demonstration activities where students can “show and tell” about the highlights of their S-L.
- \* Systematic connection of S-L outcomes to the planning of future service-learning activities.

ing activities.

Service-learning, as an instructional method in teacher education, holds vast promise for reshaping teacher education programs. It can become the means by which we do a much better job of connecting teachers to children and the communities in which they live. Service-learning can become the vehicle by which we rethink teachers’ roles, responsibilities, and functions. With S-L, we can move closer to Rifkin’s (1996) idea:

We need two sets of teachers in schools - one in the classroom, another to supervise and mentor students in service-learning in the community. (p. 12)

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