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# A model of student learning in community service field placements

*Voices from the field*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** In the USA, many universities and colleges integrate student classroom learning with interaction in the community. Educators in pre-professional programs recognize the importance of understanding how students integrate community service learning with professional practice. Yet, missing from this body of literature is a discussion of the effects of service learning on social work undergraduate students. This article provides insight into the student experience as expressed in the voices of pre-service social workers that completed community service field placements in the USA. The findings suggest a developmental model of learning with common themes that progressed from basic understanding to integration. The demonstration of the service learning model applied to undergraduate internships in social work demonstrates the broad application of community-based learning models to teaching in the health care and counseling professions.

**KEYWORDS:** *community service, professional development, service learning*

'Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both' (Honnet and Poulsen, 1989). The increasing number of colleges (Conrad and Hedin, 1982; Hamilton and Zeldin, 1987) and universities in the USA that now have community service learning programs demonstrates popular support for this statement. These programs (Heldin, 1989) integrate student classroom learning with interaction in the community. Current

research into the effect of service learning includes study of secondary students (Batchelder and Root, 1994; Giles and Eyer, 1994; Mohan, 1994; Sax and Astin, 1996), teacher education programs (Kahne and Westheimer, 1996; Root, 1994), as well as college students across a broad scope of liberal arts disciplines like political science (Markus et al., 1993), sociology (Honaganeu-Sotelo and Raskoff, 1994; Parker-Gwin, 1996; Porter and Schwartx, 1993) and psychology (Bringle and Kremer, 1993; McClusky-Fawcett and Green, 1992; Miller, 1994). Much of this research describes an increase in students' participation in community-based service after service learning experiences.

Experienced educators in pre-professional programs recognize the importance of understanding how students integrate community service with professional practice (Long and Heydt, 2001; Picciano, 1998). Current literature on the effects of service learning on pre-professional students underscores the need to understand the affective and social aspects of the students' experiences from the students' perspective (Bacon, 1999; Rocha, 2000). Missing from this body of literature is a discussion of the effects of service learning on social work or counseling undergraduate students.

This article enhances the literature in several ways. The findings provide insight into the student experience as expressed in the voices of pre-service social workers. In addition, it relies on students' reflections to develop a model to describe students' learning experiences. It also chronicles students' growth from various levels of commitment toward an on-going commitment to the community through their post-graduation professional choices. Finally, this study complements the literature on community service learning by examining the experiences of social work students who completed their field placement in a rural Midwestern community-based agency in the USA.

### **The case**

This case study was designed to provide for students professional experience in community social work by providing services for children from undeserved communities. At times, interns served as advocates for children with learning and social problems. Interns worked as tutors in academic and social skills that were designed to enhance the functioning of at-risk children. Interns also designed workshops that addressed educational enrichment, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and other school health issues.

This particular field experience further offered opportunities to engage in activities that were consistent with the role of community-based social

workers in the USA. For instance, students worked with and within the community to provide assistance to the economically disadvantaged through social programs. While in the agency, they conducted a community needs assessment, wrote grants, and attended weekly meetings with the executive director. The agency meetings addressed typical staff-related issues such as scheduling, conflicts, event planning, and matters related to agency financing.

Although internships are typical of professional health care and counseling programs in the USA, this project was unique in several ways. First, faculty support was built into the structure of this program through the addition of weekly meetings. These meetings extended the traditional faculty field liaison, which typically involved facilitating relationships with the agency and evaluating intern learning. Second, the faculty-facilitated sessions provided the trainees with a comprehensive understanding of community-based agency social work. Finally, these meetings also provided an opportunity to discuss issues that arose at the placement as well as to address conflicts with role expectations.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and setting**

The data included information from 12 subjects who volunteered to complete their senior year field experience in community settings. The study was conducted over three semesters from spring 1999 to spring 2000 with three students in the first semester, four students in the second semester, and five students in the final semester. The subjects worked in the agency for 440 hours over the course of a semester. In all, the students served over 5280 hours at the agency.

### **Data collection**

The students completed reflective logs each week that chronicled their learning experience. The students identified and discussed major learning. Each student completed 14 reflective entries, which produced 168 logs for analysis. The reflective logs generated a total of 420 potential reflective statements. Of the significant statements made, there were approximately 300 statements that were used in the analysis (71% of the statements in the logs). The statements that were not included in the analysis included incomplete thoughts, statements that lacked clarity, or notations that nothing significant happened over the prior week.

Narrative data were also collected during weekly meetings between the faculty researcher and the students. The interns spoke informally with one

another and the research staff. The sessions afforded an opportunity for the students to tell the stories of their experiences. The instructor recorded comments that reflected their perceptions of what they accomplished and had gained from the experience. All the responses were coded and the participants verified the records.

### Data analysis

The study was exploratory and, consequently, the general methodological approach was grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with theory being generated directly from the data. Triangulation and discussion with participants and colleagues were used during the analysis process to verify the findings.

The first stage of the analysis included organizing the data into themes. The data were sorted into categories that reflected primary learning themes. These categories include rapport building (152 or 51%), understanding organizational functioning (108 or 36%), and engagement with the community as a sociopolitical system (40 or 13%). The final stage of the analysis included organizing these categories into stages that reflected the students' learning pattern. The reflective statements in each category were organized by time sequence, from the initial dates of the entries to the end of the internship. This organization was interpreted to infer whether there was a pattern that reflected the growth of the students from one stage to the next (Table 1).

## Findings

### Model of conceptualization of community

During the course of the fieldwork experience, the students appeared to progress consistently across a continuum of development. The students advanced from addressing issues of client rapport to an emergent desire to fit into the agency. Following this integration they became aware of the

**Table 1** Stages in development of commitment to community service

<i>Phases of rapport building</i>	<i>Phases of agency integration</i>	<i>Community awareness</i>	<i>Integration</i>
Basic communication	Fantasy vs. reality	Identify community needs	Integration with clients
Power	Understanding systems	Interact with community	Integration with self
Reflection			

community's issues and its role in influencing program services. Finally, this understanding of community was integrated back into the interaction with the participants in the tutoring program. Once students reached this final stage, they also demonstrated an understanding of the children within a respectful context of their communities.

### **Phases of rapport building**

**Basic communication** As they entered the field setting, students appeared consumed with adjusting from their roles in the classroom. This basic communication stage was the first concern they expressed and it was representative of their first three weeks of the service experience. Students often expressed concern over their ability to interact with the children at the program as well as with the adults that they had contact with at the agency and from the community.

One student voiced an example of these concerns during the first week of the internship. She stated, 'The high point of this week was meeting the kids in the tutoring program, its weird to deal with so many different personalities. It's just a different experience working with children.' Still other comments demonstrated their concerns over their ability to interact with the tutoring students. One student stated 'I learned you must have patience to work with children. Tutoring was the greatest challenge because I haven't ever tutored children before.'

Basic communication was also the focus with students as they tried to interact initially with the community members. One student stated that interviewing skills were a challenge. He stated, 'The most significant thing I learned this week was the importance of interviewing and how you do it. It was tough wording my statements. It was the first time I interviewed a family by myself. I'm getting better at it, slowly but surely.' Interviewing was the focus of another reflective log entry in which the student seemed uncertain of his ability to ask the 'right' questions and focus the interviews in a way that accomplished his goals. He stated, 'Basically, I'm still working on my interviewing skills. I still have much to perfect, or practice until I feel comfortable. It worked, but I guess there were quite a few facts that I didn't get out of the interview.'

Another student who voiced concern about communication addressed these issues as it related to telephone contact. She stated,

The new skill I tried to use this week was being competent on the phone. Yes, its quite simple, but sometimes I get caught up with too many things, and still forget little things like the phone number and my name.

This desire to communicate effectively with people outside the agency was

shared in another reflection that said, 'It was good to learn who is where in order to communicate effectively and to get things accomplished. I also think it is important to get my face out there so people can become familiar with me.' The mastery of introductory communication skills afforded students an opportunity for engagement in relationships with the agency and its clients that led to further personal and professional insight.

**Power** By the end of the first month, the interns tended to respond to the children from authoritative positions. They appeared to try to control their clients as a way of coping with their new roles. For instance, one intern expressed, 'The greatest challenge was getting the children to recognize who I was. You have to let them know you are not on their level, and they need to respect you.' This sentiment was shared by a peer who reflected, 'I was able to take an authoritative position with the kids in the tutoring program. It seems to work. The children do what I tell them to do. It was encouraging to know that they did listen to me.'

An intern shared her classmates' struggles when she reflected on the conflicts between her authoritative experiences in practice and the role expectations she formed as a student. She expressed concern between the assumption of the imbalance of power toward the social worker when working with children by writing the following statement.

I had to use the skill of being in a total authoritative and disciplinarian role. This proved to be especially hard after what I have learned in my social work classes. We tend to be people who have a strong desire or belief in what we do. I think we are taught to be open and warm. In this particular training, I felt I could still be the latter described quality, but with a major boundary drawn around me. When working with these kids, it seems that you really need to cut-off a lot of that 'warm fuzzy' part of you and show your more serious side.

By identifying boundaries as the central concern in relationship building, this intern helped understand the initial conflict. These statements would indicate that at least one student was establishing an identity as an adult with boundaries that are different from their friendships. In these cases, the first approach to establish relationships involved being an authoritative figure. Gradually, there appeared to be an overall shift in the students' reactions to their relationships with the clients at the community center.

**Reflections** In the following weeks, the interns began to build mutual relationships with the children at the community center. Their reflections included more empathy as they tried to establish working relationships with the clients based on shared respect. The same intern that saw herself taking an authoritative position earlier stated this concern as 'I tried my

listening skills with the children. It seemed to work, a little. Instead of me just telling them what to do and them doing it. I asked them what they want to do.' Another intern voiced an understanding of the mutual aspect of the relationship when she stated that she wanted to know her tutoring students better. In particular, she acknowledged, 'I have gotten to know one of my second graders a little better. I talked with him about school and what he did over the weekend. I want to get to know my students better.'

This understanding of the children's perspective gradually led to a connection between the child's internal conflicts and their behavior. During the third week, an intern expressed this realization by stating the following.

The greatest challenge was getting one of the kids that I tutor to read a three-page story and tell me what the reading was about. This was challenging because she tried to do anything not to read and understand the book. I also wondered if the reason why it was hard for her to tell me what the book was about was because she did not understand the book.

Another student reflected similar insights about how the tutoring students were affected by their experiences when she stated, 'I was able to know one of the children this week. By listening and talking to her, I was able to understand what motivates her actions.'

In time, the interns' reflections helped them identify processes that enhanced their relationships with the clients. Rapport building extended from being comfortable with the clients on an individual level to developing a spirit of connectedness between interns and clients. An example of this was seen in the reflection during the fourth week that stated,

I have gotten to know a few children in my class better this week. I can tell that they are used to me now. I worked a lot with my class. They are acting more well behaved. The children were finally getting used to me and asking for help. Now, I might be able to make a difference.

Still others found that the connection between intern and clients could develop into cooperation. This was seen when one intern wrote:

I have gotten to know one of my students better when I had a conversation with him. He told me things that I could do to make the children behave better in the classroom. I tried to help two children at one time with reading and it didn't work because they both wanted my full attention.

In general, the interns grew from feeling uncomfortable to feeling confident in their ability to establish mutual and cooperative relationships with their clients. Along the way, they struggled with establishing a balance of power in their relationships and learned methods of interacting that demonstrated respect. Their results included a greater understanding of the learning process of their clients as well as the ability to enlist the



cooperation of their students. Their reflective experiences during the first month at the community agency were primarily focused on concerns that centered on building rapport with the children that attended the center.

### Phases of agency integration

**Fantasy vs. reality** At the outset, the interns seemed challenged to understand the organizational dynamics and to find their own place in the system. In her second week, one intern voiced this experience in her log as, 'It is necessary for me to learn more about the staff in order to see where I can fit in.' Another student shared these concerns when she stated, 'I sit back and look at all the different personalities in an agency.' Both reflections captured an overall spirit of uncertainty about roles with accompanying desires to become part of the system.

After the second week, they seemed to be frustrated about the differences between the agency as it existed and their expectations of how the ideal agency would operate. A reflection that addressed this experience stated, 'I learned agencies aren't always as well structured as they appear. Everyone needs to work together and do what they can to make the process move along as smoothly as possible.' One of her peers voiced this same concern in her log as; 'I learned that an agency goes through an on-going process of change. It can be hectic.' Still another log reflected this sentiment when the student wrote, 'I learned that it is difficult to get everyone to agree on one thing. I was able to participate in a staff meeting. I learned that organizing functions take a lot of time and effort.'

These sentiments regarding the differences between the actual agency and their perceptions of an ideal organization were clarified in a focus group meeting. The students agreed that an ideal agency would have rules that were 'set in stone' in which 'when they have something to do, it takes priority over tutoring or other projects.' Their preconceived ideas about the ideal staff were also as structured as their notion of agencies. They stated that the staff should be 'committed to children' and that this would be reflected in their 'willingness to work over hours to adjust to the children's need.' These concerns targeted staff who appeared to set limits on their time for their jobs with firm boundaries between work time and personal time.

One participant gave an example of a situation that reflected the differences between the community center's function and her expectations of a well-functioning center. She said that during the Black History program at the center the agency staff allowed the children to design their own presentation and this process concerned her. She said that the 'children designed the skits where they did what they wanted. The staff didn't tell them what to put in their skit. No one learned anything new about Black History.'

When asked what the interns expected in place of the program designed by children, they gave this description, 'That is not what social workers would do. Social workers would tell them what to do and what to put in their skit or they would make them do the skit the social worker wrote for them.' Their shared views of the commanding nature of social worker roles were not consistent with the open model that they observed at the community center. These conflicts between expectations and perceptions were a central theme among the students during the first four weeks of their field service experience.

### **Understanding systems**

Over the second month, the students identified cooperation as a theme in their understanding of successful organizations. In a log entry, one student shared this insight; 'I learned how the agency structure was. I was able to see that there was a group effort and group input on the decision-making process.' Regarding creating an understanding of the agency functioning, another student stated, 'It was interesting taking the ideas of three different individuals and making them all work together.' The theme of cooperation as a component of agency function was clarified by one student who wrote, 'I learned that everyone must work as a team and cooperate, or life at work will not be peaches and cream.'

As the students progressed in their understanding of the organization and the effectiveness of cooperation, they began to identify roles for themselves. These roles differed based on the student, but by the middle of the second month, each was able to clarify the importance of their contribution to the functioning of the unit. One student expressed the understanding of the importance of completing her own tasks within the context of cooperation and teamwork. She stated,

The most important thing I learned this week was, just do your job. You can't be concerned about what others are doing, and even if you are, the problem may but be remedied. We had a staff meeting on Wednesday. I learned that people need to do their job, and not be so concerned with others. This makes everyone's job a bit more bearable. The greatest challenge this week was dealing with the staff. It can get hard working with those you don't like, but you have to put on a smile and keep moving.

Other students perceived their need to assume leadership in cooperative efforts. One reflection voiced this understanding as; 'I learned that in some placements you have to step up in a leadership role. You have to put forth effort to get the product you want.' This student was engaged in a goal-oriented activity and assumed a key role in producing the end result.

Not all students perceived the need to be a leader in the agency. Another student satisfied the need to contribute by integrating competency with a mastery of the agency identity. He stated, 'I am getting better standing on my own two feet. I am feeling more like I authentically represent my agency.' The authentic representation appeared to demonstrate the integration of the agency identification with the student's self-perceptions.

The growth of the students in their relationships with the agency staff appeared to consume the first two months of the placement. Their initial themes of reconciling their images of an ideal agency with the actual agency evolved into finding ways to contribute within the existing organization. Each student reflected on a desire to make a unique contribution, either through leadership or through participation.

### **Community awareness**

**Identify community** Toward the end of the internship, the students demonstrated a new theme in their reflections. Students' reflections on this theme connected their understanding of the community to their understanding of the clients and organization. By the third month, they demonstrated a mixture of excitement and concern about their engagements with community members. One excited student wrote, 'The high point of the week for me was learning that we would have to do some visits. I thought this would be a chance for some excellent experience.'

Students also expressed interest in networking. They wanted the people in the community to be comfortable with them. One student best clarified this interest when she made the following entry in her reflective log.

Making new business contacts in the community was the highlight. It is always good to learn who is where in order to communicate effectively and to get things accomplished. I also think it's important to get my face out there so people can become familiar with me. That way, when people call the office, they don't feel like they're talking to a stranger.

Relationships with community members were also identified as important to help the organization meet its goals. One student wrote, 'This week I learned a lot about fundraising and how it relates to our major and public relations. If you want to get donations from people, you must have a cheery personality as well as verbal skills.' Another student identified community relations as a key factor in recruiting volunteers. She stated, 'I used my recruiting skills and was successful. I think it worked because I know some good people and have good friends that understand my predicament.'

Not all students approached community outreach with enthusiasm. One student voiced this perspective when she wrote, 'The greatest challenge this

week was going on a home visit. We didn't know exactly what to expect. Everything went quite well.' Yet, another student reflected on the outcome of these outreach activities. She stated that the most significant thing she learned was that 'most parents are open to people who are trying to help them'. The outreach experience that included home visits led the students to understand their tutoring students within the context of their families.

**Interaction with the community** Their understanding of the child, family, and community connections contributed to their ability to create community-based programs. One example of this understanding was voiced in a discussion of the need assessment. A student stated,

The greatest challenge this week was actually putting together the need assessment. Since we are distributing them to different populations, we had to keep that fact in the back of our minds. We had to make age appropriate, and educational level appropriate assessments.

## **Integration**

**Integration with clients** By the end of the semester, the students began to integrate community principles and direct interaction with the children in the tutoring program. For instance, one student reflected on an experience that led to integrating a community issue, marijuana use, with the interaction with a child.

The high point of the week was when I took the boys in the program bowling. We all had a great time. We ate pizza, talked, and laughed. I have gotten to know the boys better. Well, when we went bowling, I talked with them. We all had fun. The greatest challenge was dealing with one of my second graders. I overheard him talking about smoking pot. I sat him down and talked with him.

**Integration with self** The need to assume an active role in community activities was voiced by another intern who connected personal action with her prior beliefs about individual responsibility in this statement.

I have already known that if you want to make a difference you have to do something about it. This week really has shown me how things won't happen unless you do something about it. Sitting around a lot talking only does so much; you must be an active participant.

Finally, the community experience also provided students with an opportunity to transfer knowledge from the target group to their own lives. One student's statement regarding her experience preparing an HIV workshop provided an insight into the role of self-growth in their learning process.

I learned how important it is to educate the children about sex and STDs. The high point of the week was when it hit me about how cautious you must be to keep from risking getting a sexually transmitted disease. The greatest challenge was putting this HIV workshop together. I am still not done yet but it's coming together.

## **Discussion**

These findings provide a detailed view of these students' perceptions of their learning experiences during a field placement that supported current service learning principles as practiced in the USA. The students' reflections provided insight into the process of learning for a group of pre-service social workers. Although the students began this experience with various levels of understanding of community-based agencies; they all progressed toward an outcome level of commitment that included employment in similar agencies following graduation.

The social work students in this study experimented with engagement following realizations that they felt awkward around this new group of people. In the early stages, they attempted to establish an imbalance of power that placed the student in a role of perceived authority over their clients. The awareness that emerged from these early experiments included the realization that other people may not behave as instructed and, further, that enhanced communication may require mutual engagement. These reflections lead to action and experimentation that resulted in establishing mutual relationships through tutoring.

At the same time, while they progressed toward mutually respectful relationships with children, these students also opened the door to understanding the people involved in the organization. Through respect, the students gained a deeper understanding of the agency. This deeper understanding may have increased their appreciation for the organization and its work.

By the final stages of the project, students began reaching out to the community and understanding its members within the context of the community. Through their reflections, students presented views of individuals within the framework of the same problem as experienced by the community. Examples of conditions that students indicated they viewed within a community context included drugs, academic problems, and the spread of HIV. By visualizing the problem on the community level, as well as the individual level, students progressed toward understanding the need to develop both individual and community support for these conditions.

The demonstration of the service learning model applied to undergraduate internships in social work demonstrates the broad application of community-based learning models. The community-based experience supports

traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching in the health care and counseling professions. This method helps connect universities with communities, offers new skills and opportunities for students to engage in active learning situations, and promotes more reflective practice in pre-professional training. Finally, students experience real-life applications of their profession, with the added benefit of a sense of social responsibility.

### Note

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