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Karl T. Pfeiffer
University of Alaska Anchorage

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A Critical Consideration of the Introduction of Community-Service Learning Projects To Courses in the Sociology of Social Problems

Karl T. Pfeiffer
University of Alaska Anchorage

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Abstract

This paper examines the introduction of community service learning activities in lower division (200 level) undergraduate Sociology of Social Problems courses. Data from student evaluations and grades are presented for five semesters of this class between 1994-1996 (n=98), prior to the introduction of a community service learning option. This data is contrasted with five semesters of the class between 1996-1998 (n=141), following the introduction of service learning activities. Despite generally positive feedback from students and increased enrollments, results suggest that student performance as measured by grades has not significantly changed with the introduction of community service activities. Also student evaluations of the class are somewhat lower. The community service learning option itself is discussed, and examples and descriptions of community service sites are presented. A discussion of implications for future research on community service learning outcomes concludes the paper.

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Correspondence may be directed to:

Karl T. Pfeiff

Sociology Department

University of Alaska Anchorage

3211 Providence Drive

Anchorage, AK 99508

Phone: (907) 786-1746

E-mail: aftkp@uaa.alaska.edu

Introduction

The sociological literature on experiential learning traces its theoretical roots, like other disciplines, to John Dewey (1938; DeMartini, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Giles and Eyler, 1994). In *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938:5-6), he argues for progressive educational goals that cultivate individuality through free activity and learning through experience. This is expected to promote the development of practical skills with direct appeal, as well as optimizing present opportunities and an acquaintance with the changing world. He argues that the traditional goals of education focus on conformity to authority and external discipline, learning from texts and teachers, skills learned by drill and characterized by a vague future orientation. This is a direct consequence of teachers' use of static goals and materials. The current interest in experiential learning in general, and community service learning in particular, is founded on the goals of progressive education.

Specific applications of service learning in college sociology classes are receiving greater attention in the literature. *Teaching Sociology*, a journal of the American Sociological Association, dedicated the entire Fall 1998 (26:4) issue to this topic. Other recent discussions in the sociological literature regarding experiential learning have focused on two general contexts. The first context includes those techniques used primarily in the

classroom. These would include activities such role playing (Guiffre and Paxton, 1997), guest lectures (Lance, 1987), debates (Crone, 1997), and games (Takata, 1997). The second context includes those techniques used primarily outside of the classroom. This category would include activities such as journaling (Grauerholz and Copenhaver, 1994), field trips (Scarce, 1997), internships (Danzger, 1988; Kotarba, 1990; Miller, 1990; Neapolitan, 1992), research projects (Jenkins, 1995; Misra, 1997; Schmid, 1992), study abroad (Halsey, 1990; Kain and DAndrea, 1992; Levinson, 1979), and community service (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff, 1994),

The focus of this paper is on the last activity: community service as a form of experiential learning. It will specifically focus on the introduction of community service projects as an optional component of lower division sociology of social problems courses, and measured impact in student and teacher performance that may be associated with community service activities.

Methodology:

The lower division sociology course that is the focus of this paper is called Social Problems and Solutions. This class has an introductory sociology course as a prerequisite. Some sociology majors take the class, but students most typically use it to fulfill general education requirements. The class is intended to apply some of the theories and methods taught in the introductory sociology class to social problems. A textbook and the local newspaper are required reading. Exams are take-home, essay-style. The essay questions are attached to the syllabus and given to students on the first day of class. A general goal of the course is that students develop a degree of expertise in at least one social problem during the course of the semester. Prior knowledge of exam questions is hoped to promote this goal, rather than broader study with less depth.

Before the introduction of optional community service activities during the Fall 1996 semester, all students completed a summary and critique of a sociology journal article. This 4-6 page paper required a detailed summary of an articles theoretical orientation, methodology, and conclusions. It also required a critique of these areas, as well as an assessment of style and the topics substantive importance to society. This assignment was a major component (22%) of the final grade. It proved (and continues to prove) to be a difficult assignment for many students.

Normally, it was a small, but enjoyable class to teach. Students also appeared to enjoy the class and usually evaluated it above department and college averages. (See Table 2.)

The only consistent student criticism of the Social Problems and Solutions class was that it didn't focus enough on solutions. My initial response to this criticism was to assemble a group of articles that described community service agencies and programs that demonstrated some success in solving social problems. This became the topic of a class toward the end of the semester. Students were also encouraged to identify programs that successfully address social problems from newspaper reports, and to discuss these reports in class.

During the Fall 1996 semester, a class discussion of student internships and research projects in various local service agencies raised the issue of experiential and community service learning for the social problems class. Two difficulties of setting-up these activities were evident: risk and liability, and the additional time requirements that would be necessary for adequate supervision of service activities. Implicit in these excuses was the fact that I

didn't really trust second year college students, who weren't sociology majors, to responsibly and independently perform community service work.

However, this particular class had a number of non-traditional students. One of them happened to be the volunteer coordinator for a large local human service agency. She also happened to have a list of most of the local agencies that would be appropriate for community service activities. Serendipity created an opportunity for correcting a problem with the course. The class was given the option of substituting 4 hours of community service work and a reaction paper, for the journal summary and critique exercise. Interested students were given a list of agencies that were providing various community services. They were responsible for making all other arrangements themselves. Students were informed that there might be random checks of hours claimed at various agencies. Extra credit presentations were optional for students doing either journal critiques or community service. Students pursuing the community service option were encouraged to give brief progress reports at the beginning of each class. This allowed for some feedback. It also gave the rest of the class the opportunity to vicariously experience community service and to ask questions about it from peers.

Obviously, this isn't the way most community service and experiential learning is introduced into curricula. Normally, time devoted to community service is greater, as is teacher supervision and the expectation that students will acquire skills that can be validly assessed for purposes of grading. Community service learning is also normally *teacher-driven* or *administrator-driven*. The interesting aspect of this process is that it was *student-driven*. Another interesting aspect is that community service was an optional component of the class, rather than a required one.

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Qualitative data in the form of student evaluations and reaction papers has been collected since the introduction of the community service option in 1996. Quantitative data from student evaluations, university and department enrollments, and grades have also been collected since that time. Comparisons are made with a comparable sample of this class prior to the introduction of the community service option. Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS Version 6.1.1 for the Macintosh.

Results:

A total of 239 students were enrolled in 10 sections of Social Problems and Solutions between the Fall Semester 1994 and the 1998 Summer Session. 98 took the course prior to having the community service option. 141 took the class when community service was an optional activity. Table 1 presents enrollment data by year

Table 1 – Class, Department and College Enrollment Characteristics By Year and Session

		Year & Session									
		Fall 1994	Spr. 1995	Fall 1995	Spr. 1996	Sum. 1996	Fall 1996	Spr. 1997	Fall 1997	Spr. 1998	Sum. 1998
Class		16	17	17	26	22	31	27	31	32	20
Size											
Enrollments	Dept.	36.1	*	34.3	*	*	35.0	*	31.5	*	*
	Avg.										
	Class										
Size											
College		25.1	*	25.1	*	*	24.9	*	26.5	*	*
Avg.											

* Data not available

Student feedback has been consistently positive for four consecutive semesters. Roughly half of the class did community service work and a reaction paper as an alternative to a journal critique during the Fall 1996 semester. At present, nearly 70% of the class elects this option. This is interesting given the relatively higher time requirements for community service work. Additionally, class enrollments have increased from an average of 20 students from Fall 1994 through Summer 1996, to an average of 28 students from Fall 1996 through Spring 1998. This increase was statistically significant. (See Table 3.) Given an overall decrease in student enrollments for the university (1997 UAA Chancellors Report), decreases in average sociology class size, and a specific decrease in enrollments for lower division sociology courses (UAA Office of Institutional Research Memo 2/5//98), the increases in enrollments for this particular section may well be due to the popularity of the community service learning option.

Students have done community service work in over twenty different organizational settings. These settings include homeless shelters, local school district special education classrooms, food banks, Special Olympics, senior centers, Camp Fire Boys and Girls, domestic violence shelters, and AIDS/HIV programs. Students often return for additional community service work beyond the requirements of the course. Several have become employees of the organizations for whom they worked while fulfilling the service learning option of the course. Several have done follow-up internship placements at these organizations or conducted subsequent research on topics encountered while engaged in community service activities. Student presentations on community service activities consistently generate high levels of class discussion.

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Table 2 – Student Grades and Evaluation Scores (Class, Dept., and College averages) By Year and Session

		Year & Session									
		Fall 1994	Spr. 1995	Fall 1995	Spr. 1996	Sum. 1996	Fall 1996	Spr. 1997	Fall 1997	Spr. 1998	Sum. 1998
Avg		93.6	69	79.6	79.8	90.6	93.5	90.8	94.8	84	88.8
Grade											
And Evaluations	Rate	4.07	4.00	4.62	4.24	4.63	4.38	3.58	4.25	4.04	3.63
	Instructional materials as excellent	3.90	3.88	3.78	3.93	4.47	3.99	4.15	4.40	4.45	4.03
Student Grades	Emphasizes conceptual learning rather than rote memorization	3.91	3.94	3.91	4.01	4.20	3.98	4.05	4.37	4.42	4.52
	Would recommend course to other students	4.87	4.78	4.85	4.95	4.87	4.67	4.53	4.72	4.65	4.38
	conceptual learning rather than rote memorization	4.19	4.06	3.97	4.23	4.61	4.23	4.48	4.34	4.42	3.90
	Would recommend course to other students	4.17	4.17	4.18	4.22	4.45	4.23	4.29	4.37	4.42	4.50
	Would recommend course to other students	4.87	4.56	4.85	4.76	4.69	4.62	4.53	4.36	4.48	3.69
	recommend course to other students	4.07	3.95	3.82	4.13	4.79	4.10	4.34	4.42	4.52	3.90
	course to other students	4.03	4.07	4.05	4.12	4.35	4.12	4.17	4.40	4.45	4.52

Notes:

Class averages are in boldface, followed by department and college averages.

Eval Q#1: "I rate the instructional materials used in this course as excellent."

Eval Q#2: "The instructor emphasizes conceptual learning rather than rote memorization."

Eval Q#3: "I'm glad I took this course and would recommend it to other students."

Scale: 1=Not at all descriptive 2=Moderately descriptive 5=Very descriptive

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Despite generally positive feedback from students and increased enrollments for the class, student grades and faculty evaluations have not shown the same improvement. Table 2 presents average student grades and average evaluation ratings for the class, sociology department and college, by year and session. The evaluation questions that were selected for comparative purposes were:

- I rate the instructional material as excellent. (0-5)
- The instructor emphasizes conceptual learning rather than rote memorization. (0-5)
- I would recommend this course to other students. (0-5)

While average grades have improved from 82.52% to 90.38%, this increase is not statistically significant. Also, while student course evaluations are somewhat lower, only Q#2 “The instructor emphasizes conceptual learning rather than rote memorization”, was statistically significant ($p < .05$). It should be noted that all evaluations are still relatively high and typically above department and college means.

Discussion:

The community service learning component of the Social Problems and Solutions course has not been an unqualified success. There were improved class enrollments, small improvements in grades, and small decreases in student evaluations of the course. None of these changes is unequivocally the result of community service learning activities. None are large enough differences, in my opinion, to convincingly argue for the elimination or maintenance of the service learning option. However, additional student feedback suggests that the community service option has substantially

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addressed the issue of inadequate focus on solutions to social problems within the course. Some brief examples follow:

“I got a chance to work at the soup kitchen. The organization provides free breakfast and lunches for over 400 homeless people in Ö daily. Also I was not prepared for the kitchen and its customers to be as clean as they appeared. Coming from Russia, and having the whole different experience with the homeless, I found that absolutely unexpected.”

“My time at Ö went by fast and I was shocked when it was over, I wanted to stay longer. In the two days I was at Ö I had to come to terms with my feelings toward homeless people and toward myself. Sometimes I do think we stay in our comfortable places and can become numb to the world around us, sterilizing it and only looking at the uncomfortable things from a safe distance.”

“These people showed great respect to each other and also toward me. The food line was outside the door where I sat and no one took cuts or were impatient with the children. The line was long and the paperwork endless, but they hung in there even when the turkeys were gone and so were all the warm winter clothes. I will go back and volunteer during my holiday break. I am taking my husband along with me next time. I truly enjoyed the people.”

“I also worked in a food pantry and was receiving the same type of benefits. Its nice to see this type of help being offered to people that might just be temporarily down and out. I know what its like, and I hope programs like these keep getting donations so that the less fortunate can perhaps live a better life.”

“The crisis pregnancy center is in its small way helping women irrespective of age, marital status or faith make a crisis pregnancy situation turn into a positive one. In the midst of the abortion controversy, the crisis pregnancy center is making an impact.”

“Teachers today deal with problems that my elementary school teacher would know nothing about, children on medication and sexual activity just to name two.”

“Many homeless people are just like me, as a matter of fact they all are, people who live and try to get by in this community.”

“I have never been before to such a places, neither in America, nor in Russia. This is not because there are no such social problems in my country, rather, there are no such social services for poor, homeless people in my native town of Magadan.”

“I realized that being down (sic) syndrome is not a social problem. The problem is some people are afraid to get to know them..”

“The stereotypes I had prior were so far from the truth that I wonder how I developed them.”

“I don't know who got more out of the experience (at a senior center) them or me. Probably me. It was a very enjoyable day.”

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Table 3: t-tests for Paired Samples: Student Grades, Class Size, and Evaluation Ratings

Class Size	Mean	SD	SE of Mean	t-value	df	2-tail Sig.
Pre-CS	19.6	4.278	1.913			
Post-CS	28.2	4.970	2.223	-2.78	4	.050
Avg. Grade						
Pre-CS	82.52	9.833	4.398			
Post-CS	90.38	4.262	1.906	-1.72	4	.161
Eval. Q #1						
Pre-CS	4.312	.299	.134			
Post-CS	3.976	.360	.161	1.60	4	.185
Eval. Q #2						
Pre-CS	4.86	.061	.027			
Post-CS	4.59	.137	.061	4.50	4	.011
Eval Q #3						
Pre-CS	4.746	.127	.057			
Post-CS	4.336	.373	.167	2.49	4	.067

Notes:

Eval Q#1: "I rate the instructional materials used in this course as excellent."

Eval Q#2: "The instructor emphasizes conceptual learning rather than rote memorization."

Eval Q#3: "I'm glad I took this course and would recommend it to other students."

Scale: 1=Not at all descriptive

2=Moderately descriptive

5=Very descriptive

Students involved in the community service component of the course become more aware of solutions to social problems. Their contributions to class discussions and their presentations also help students who do not engage in community service become more aware of solutions to social problems. On this basis,

continued use and development of the community service option is justified.

Future Community Service and Research

Like most innovations, community service learning confronts some considerable problems. The ones encountered in this course were similar to ones noted in the literature. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Raskoff (1994) note the difficulties connecting academics with community service. The process is not automatic. They also identify additional problems related to prejudice and stereotypes. Grauerholz and Copenhaver (1994) raise issues of ethics related to student disclosure of sensitive personal information. The problem of legal liabilities for student safety during community service is also a concern.

The question of how effective these techniques may prove to be remains particularly intriguing. As noted earlier, community service learning extends the tradition of progressive education, in contrast to more traditional educational goals. The more traditional educational goals are the ones with which we have the greatest experience in measurement. The goals of progressive education, while compelling, may be somewhat obscured by the ideology that has promoted them. This certainly makes them more challenging to operationalize. Future evaluation of the community service component of Social Problems and Solutions will need to go beyond the traditional variables like class enrollments, grades, and student evaluations. It will also have to be attentive to the precision problems of measuring variables like commitment to social justice, reduction of prejudice, or improved community involvement.

My greatest interest (and the data that I presently lack) is in knowing how strong an influence the optional exposure to community service has on students subsequent study and

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employment. While I know anecdotally that interests sparked by community service activities have resulted in subsequent course work, research, and jobs, I have not systematically conducted longitudinal follow-up to measure that impact. I believe this may be an important future direction for experiential learning in general, and for community service learning in particular.

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