Chapter 34
Reconceptualizing Service-Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Reflections and Recommendations

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Introduction

“Service-learning” has been used to define a wide array of experiential educational experiences. Jacoby (1996) described it as containing three elements: students learn academic content while working in the community; reflection on their own experience in the community and how that informs the academic content; and consideration of how the academic content informs their community experience. Broadly defined, there is consensus that it is a pedagogy combining academic study with community service and reflection and fostering students’ deeper understanding of subject matter and capacity for critical thinking. Especially relevant to our present moment, Sigmon (1994) noted that the “ideal” balance between service to community and academic learning varies and posited a typology, highlighting that service-learning may be more “SERVICE-learning” while at other times more appropriately denoted as “service-LEARNING,” depending upon which goals are primary, with the hyphen symbolizing the process of reflection. Bringle and Hatcher (1996) focus on the transition from volunteering to participating in a credit bearing course where the needs of the community are served while enhancing “civic responsibility.” Kaye (2010) highlighted the importance of service-learning, addressing real community needs; and Sandaran (2012) emphasized service-learning students having the opportunity to learn about communities other than their own and gaining insight into marginalized groups. Howard (1993) focused on students learning responsibility and addressing meaningful issues, while Speck and Hoppe (2004) made civic engagement and communitarian involvement primary. Studies have affirmed the
long-term positive effects of service-learning programs for students’ personal, academic, and moral development (Meyer et al. 2019).

Experiential learning in the curriculum area of field practice/internship has always been essential to social work education and in 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) named field work its “signature pedagogy” (Boitel and Fromm 2014). In 2006, the dean of the college of arts and sciences and our dean agreed to collaborate on providing undergraduate students across campus with meaningful community engagement. Our School of Social Work, with its long-standing history in direct practice/experiential learning, would be an appropriate home for this approach to teaching and learning. In 2007, the first service-learning course was offered in partnership with a youth program housed at a settlement house, and our service-learning program has consistently evolved over the years, resulting in our current offering of seven different courses.

**Service-Learning in the Time of COVID-19: When “Service-Learning Becomes Service-LEARNING”**

When the emergence of the current health crisis necessitated a rapid pivot to remote learning, the service-learning instructors faced the unique challenges of transitioning courses that are experientially based to predominantly classroom-centered learning. How could courses with a significant service component be reconceptualized to remain meaningful and relevant during this time? How could our school retain a collaborative campus and community partnership, with an emphasis on reciprocity and mutual benefit? How could we deliver effective service-learning courses to our students in the virtual space? To address some of these concerns, the following service-learning courses were adapted: (1) service-learning through youth and community engagement, (2) service-learning with immigrant youth, (3) service-learning with holocaust survivors, and (4) service-learning: Alzheimer’s disease – sharing the lived experience.

**Service-Learning Through Youth and Community Engagement**

In 2007, the school received a small “Learn and Serve” grant in partnership with a local community-based organization to create its first undergraduate service-learning course. For 2 hours weekly, students engage with middle school youth in academic tutoring, recreational activities, and cultural enrichment programs while attending a weekly class. The service-learning course is a collaborative effort, designed with an emphasis on reciprocity between partners. Through shared goals, interests, and commitment, students connect with youth by tutoring and providing mentorship, as well as helping to increase organizational capacity and learn about
volunteerism with this unique age group. While many students have worked with other age groups, this is often their first exposure to middle school youth. The direct experience with the youth holds some surprises: it enhances their appreciation for the nuances of their behavior, strengths, and vulnerabilities and the challenges of negotiating a mentoring relationship with this age cohort. Through ongoing reflection, the course not only provides academic enhancement and civic engagement; it also offers a forum for students to identify their own values, assumptions, and biases throughout the service experience, a key objective of service-learning pedagogy.

With the onset of the pandemic, unfortunately, students working with the afterschool program were unable to remain directly involved with the youth for the duration of the semester. The site experienced challenges of its own in their efforts to move afterschool tutoring and recreational activities to an online format. Once accomplished, students had the opportunity to participate in activities albeit the primary obstacle: low youth attendance. Therefore, the focus of the class leaned toward the didactic content, and the key was to integrate the current situation into the existing material, making it as relevant and educational as possible; students maintained interest in the youth, and this was aided by remote involvement of the site director who provided continuous updates on the students and their families.

Coincidentally, and unfortunately, the middle school youths’ situations highlighted the impact of the meso- and macro-level factors that had been the focus of discussions prior to the pandemic. The site director shared the challenges youth were having in participating remotely with both school and afterschool activities. Many are the result of the “digital divide”: they lack access to computers and the Internet, and if they reside in crowded quarters, they may not have a private/quiet space to complete their work. Their lack of attendance to afterschool remote activities was understandable, given their primary task of (and families’ emphasis on) meeting the daily academic requirements of regular school subjects. Furthermore, as the middle school youth are largely of low-income backgrounds, many of their families were stressed with job loss and financial concerns. As the large majority are Chinese-American, residing on the Lower East Side and in Chinatown in New York City, they additionally faced a developing anti-Asian sentiment and bias erupting from the COVID-19 pandemic. The students noted how the current crisis had illuminated some of the meso-/macro-level factors’ impact on the youths’ situations in a “real-world” way, not just theoretically. The current situation presented an opportunity in real time to discuss major inequities in our systems; unequal access to income, health care, technology, housing, and employment was blatantly highlighted in the lives of these youth and their families. Additionally, as we had discussed the importance of peers and school in the “meso” worlds of middle school youth, the students considered how the rapid separation of students from their school and peer communities might impact their developmental needs and emotional well-being. On the macro-level, students were disappointed to learn that initial reports indicated that as a result of the city’s financial losses due to the health crisis, the mayor’s fiscal budget for 2021 includes a proposal to cut funding to afterschool programming, potentially negatively impacting 223,000 middle school youth who attend these programs.
Service-Learning with Immigrant Youth

Service-learning with immigrant youth focuses on students’ understanding of the youth with whom they work and the contexts in which they live and learn. Students explore the processes of immigration and resettlement. The course touches on the fundamentals of engaging individuals in a helping situation, theories related to individual development, and implications of race, ethnicity, culture, and immigration. Students share their experiences, integrated with their readings through logs and class discussion.

Our students provide service through academic coaching and mentoring for refugees from such nations as Haiti, Honduras, Yemen, Bangladesh, Moldova, Uganda, and Sudan for a minimum of 2 hours weekly at an international high school. Students assist the classroom teachers by working with small groups of students, to help them understand the classroom lessons. Students are often placed in small groups where they share the students’ native languages. The most useful languages our students speak are Arabic and Spanish. In addition to helping them with classwork and assignments, they also have the opportunity to get to know each other. The high school students often want to know about college life. They often talk about their country of origin and what life was like for them and the people they left behind.

Classroom content focuses on refugee and immigrant families, the countries they come from, and their experiences of arrival to the United States. Adolescent development is explored, as are the challenges and protective factors of being part of an immigrant group in New York City (NYC). The class also provides material on tutoring methods with immigrant adolescents.

When the pandemic forced the closure of both NYC public schools and our university, this service-learning course continued remotely. Students enrolled in the course returned to their homes in Texas, Tennessee, California, Egypt, Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and even, New York. They were eager to continue tutoring, and the international high school connected them to a tutoring lab. Though the high school students all received tablets, there were challenges: they did not have good internet connections and had to share small spaces with siblings and other family members, many of whom had jobs. In addition, the challenges of distance learning appeared to decrease their motivation. Finally, as time went on, given that these students were living within immigrant enclaves in communities of color, their families and neighbors were developing higher incidences of COVID-19 illness.

Classroom content increasingly focused on relevant weekly videos added to readings. These described life in refugee camps and adolescents’ adjustment to American life both in New York City as well as in small towns throughout the United States. In the classroom, there was additional interest in exploring our students’ immigration backgrounds, providing for a richer sense of community.
Service-Learning with Holocaust Survivors

This course, offered since 2010, is co-taught with a historian and provides psycho-social understanding of holocaust survivors within a historical perspective. It is offered in conjunction with students’ participation in a weekly service experience, wherein they visit holocaust survivors who are clients of a community-based organization. The weekly class explores the historical/political backdrop of the holocaust in addition to the social and psychological effects of trauma on the lives of survivors. Emphasis is placed on resilience and the lives refashioned by immigration to the United States. The students’ role is to form friendships with the survivors, so that they can learn about each other. A number of former students have stayed in touch with their “older friend” until the survivor died.

When in-person visits were suspended, our community partner was eager to have students continue either by phone or FaceTime. The elderly and often homebound survivors needed contact more than ever. Students were advised to adjust their phone calls to be shorter, increase their frequency, and make them more concrete in nature. They were surprised by their older friends’ resilience in a time of such generalized anxiety and uncertainty. In class, the usual number of Yale archive testimonies listened to was increased to supplement the shorter conversations students were having with their “older friends.” It is likely that students were able to successfully maintain their relationships because they had formed connections in person earlier in the semester. Class discussions reviewed testimonies they watched and presented the opportunity to discuss more generalized effects of long-term trauma both among holocaust survivors and survivors of torture from different parts of the world.

Service-Learning: Alzheimer’s Disease – Sharing the Lived Experience

In 2019, the school partnered with the Family Support Program of the Alzheimer’s and Dementia Center at a local medical center to initiate a service-learning course which added an academic component to an existing intergenerational program. Students (known as “buddies”) provide companionship and activities to adults in the early stage of Alzheimer’s disease (known as “mentors”) and respite for their caregivers, while acquiring classroom knowledge about the disease and its impact on the adults and their caregivers. The direct experiences with program participants and their caregivers provide students the opportunity to challenge any preconceived ideas they may have had, especially the stigma that surrounds this population. As one student articulated, “The class helped me understand that people with dementia are capable of so much: what’s considered an achievement or a good day might change as the disease progresses…but if people have the support they need they can still live a full and dignified life.”
Given that most students were paired with older adults in this course, COVID-19 necessitated an immediate, precipitous end to the visiting experience, such that students were unable to say goodbye to their mentors in person. Some reverted to sporadic telephone “check-ins,” but given the nature of the disease for some (memory loss/cognitive impairment) and the constant presence of the caregiver, these were challenging to maintain. Once again, remote learning became highly classroom focused and academic in nature, integrating time for reflection on the current situation and the relevant challenges it poses to this specific, already vulnerable population. A series of guest lectures had been scheduled prior to the disruption, and these proceeded smoothly on a remote basis.

The immediacy of the health crisis prompted discussion of what such an event means in the unique lives of people with Alzheimer’s disease and their caregivers. How would this further the isolation, confinement, and stress of individuals who could not be oriented to the outside world and their caregivers who will find less time alone and opportunity for respite from their daily caretaking activities? What if their caregiver gets the coronavirus? And for those individuals who are institutionalized, how would this situation of separation from their loved ones affect their cognitive and emotional well-being? Finally, how would people with cognitive and recognition impairment react to caregivers wearing masks? Additionally, students reflected upon the experience of having to readily adapt to remote learning and the abrupt suspension of their in-person relationships.

Lessons Learned and Future Possibilities for Remote Service-Learning

With the future of in-person education uncertain, it is prudent to consider future possibilities for remote service-learning opportunities. Students should not be dissuaded from enrolling in such service-learning courses but rather should be encouraged and supported to participate in reimagining the design and implementation of volunteer activities to address community problems, especially at times of growing need. How can positive and productive college-community partnerships be continued, though reconceptualized?

First, service-learning courses must continue to provide mutual, reciprocal benefits for students’ education while assisting community program participants. Therefore, community partners must be consulted and engaged in the process. How can the students best respond to their needs? In this past semester, as courses evolved remotely, instructors maintained open communication and ongoing evaluation with their partner organizations to ensure that all parties’ goals were adequately and realistically met: students, community settings, and the individuals they serve. This effort will be ongoing as we resume remote service activities in the upcoming semester.
Second, alternative methods of service delivery should be population specific, and, where appropriate, “tried and true” approaches can be utilized. For example, in the case of older adults, when visiting was not feasible, students were encouraged to maintain contact with their partners, through technological means or through telephone “check-ins.” Such “wellness calls” through computer or phone can decrease the social isolation of older adults. While it was not achieved this semester, with the advent of so many virtual activities developing, it may be possible for future students to join participants remotely in a group activity. For example, individuals with Alzheimer’s disease have been engaging in remote art, music, exercise, and even museum trip programming. Students might join such activity efforts to observe participants and, where feasible, interact with them. Additionally, a platform like Zoom can ease the process of bringing “experts” into the classroom. For example, some holocaust survivors who would have been too frail to join the classroom in person to share their lived experience were now able to join more easily. Perhaps potential isolation of older adults can be decreased by connecting them to one another either by video platforms or, in the absence of Internet, by telephone.

With immigrant youth, tutors can potentially join classrooms and work with subgroups who need additional assistance in breakout rooms. With middle school youth in afterschool programs, innovative means of providing academic and social emotional learning can be further developed to include not only remote tutoring but also enriching arts, cultural, and recreational activities. Youth may enjoy interacting with peers, staff, and students through online games, whiteboard activities, contemporary music, etc. Students can provide interaction, structure, and consistency to support youth and promote their engagement; their creativity and knowledge of technology can facilitate the development of age-appropriate online programming activities that would improve attendance and enhance interest and further connection to their student-mentors. Perhaps our students can harness their intellectual interests and talents to offer basic lectures/presentations to youth/older adults in a remote, interactive environment. Of course, assuring equitable access to technology for all individuals would be essential for conducting successful remote involvement with any population served.

Third, didactic classroom material should be augmented with content relevant to the current situation including exploration of how various populations are attempting to adapt to the situation. In all likelihood, crises like COVID-19 may serve to underscore the unique histories and circumstances, underlying vulnerabilities, unmet needs, and strengths of the populations students work with.

Fourth, time must be spent on students’ reflection on the redefinition of an experiential learning course. The precipitous nature of transitioning to remote instruction, the loss of the opportunity to “say goodbye” in person and concern about their partners’ and their own well-being, cannot be overlooked. The opportunity for reflection on a shared experience, while challenging and/or disruptive, may serve to simultaneously highlight their strengths and underscore resilience and further a sense of community in the classroom.

Fifth, lessons learned during this time may have future implications for reconceptualization of service delivery as necessitated by situations that prohibit in-person
contact. It is important to note that though the transition to remote learning was precipitous, the service-learning courses described benefited from a half semester completed with students in person, such that they were familiar with their instructors and their classmates. Should a situation arise wherein classes are remote from the onset, additional attention may need to be paid to reimagining service, developing a cohesive classroom environment and a feeling of community, while students similarly are working from the onset to develop relationships with their agency partners and constituents.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated a plethora of changes in daily living, and the modalities of teaching and learning offered by educational settings are no exception. As institutions of higher education are currently positioned and required to further the promotion of remote education, so service-learning courses must keep pace by collaborating on the development of novel, innovative, and engaging methods of continuing service to organizations and their participants while enhancing college students’ academic advancement and civic involvement. The past semester demonstrated a shared experience of severe disruption and even trauma for some elicited vulnerabilities and at the same time illuminated strengths of all parties involved: students, instructors, organizations, and their participants. Students and instructors successfully pivoted from traditional service-learning to more of a “service-LEARNING” model. As crisis may lead to opportunity, the continued need for remote learning can open new doors to innovative, creative, and valuable ways of integrating service with academic content, while adhering to the true mission and balance of service-learning.

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