

# The Addition of Service Learning to a Social Studies Methods Course

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What is service learning? The terms, community service or volunteer service, these are terms we understand. Service learning is more than volunteering for a good cause. It is more dynamic and interactive. Service learning is “a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves.” (Eyler & Giles, 1999) In other words, the service is an integral part of the learning. When attached to an academic course, the service performs double duty in giving the student an opportunity to learn in a “real” life situation and to connect that learning with the book learning in the classroom. The service done by the learner benefits not just the volunteer activity, but the volunteer as well.

One of the major benefits of service learning in an academic course is experiences with diversity. Students may not appreciate the complexity of diverse populations through classroom experiences only. In volunteering, activities can include exposure to people in poverty, with handicaps, from a variety of racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. “Service learning provides a context for faculty to connect students with various populations, providing them with experiences that assist them in constructing a more robust understanding of people who may be very different from themselves.” (Galantino, 2006)

In the 1990’s, Alexander Astin and colleagues at UCLA did a longitudinal study of undergraduate students who had participated in both service learning and community service. They noted significant positive effects on the following performance measures: academic performance (GPA, writing, thinking), values (activism/racial understanding), self-efficacy, leadership, choice of service career, and plans to participate in service after college. (Astin, et al. 2000) Principal findings showed that course-based service was associated with strong academic outcomes, four out of five service learning students “felt that their service made a difference,” and faculty and students developed an enhanced awareness of civic responsibility and personal effectiveness. (Astin, et el. 2000)

Service learning has been formalized as part of universities and colleges across the nation. One such effort at increasing service learning has been Campus Compact. Campus Compact is coalition of 1100 college and university presidents who have made educating citizens to participate in a democratic society a national priority. In past 20 years Campus Compact has engaged more than 20 million students in service and service-learning. (Campus Compact, 2007) In the summer of 2008, the Tennessee legislature funded Campus Compact and 29 state colleges and universities joined the effort to include service learning in the curriculum. The University of Tennessee at Martin joined this initiative and with the help of the American Democracy Project began initiatives to further service learning and civic engagement with the students. It should be noted that this is different from the extra-curricular efforts of organizations on campus that include service to the community as part of their agenda. The mission is for service learning to penetrate the academic core, for pedagogy to include problem solving and community service as an approach to learning.

The mission of teacher education program at UTM includes: exposing students to issues of diversity, cultural competence, individual perceptions of quality of life, and the development of reflective practice.

Each of these issues can be addressed through service learning, perhaps more effectively than simply through classroom methodology. Service learning can expose students to real people from diverse backgrounds and cultures and at the same time use reflective practice to assess those experiences.

The question that this paper addresses is the following:

Would adding a service learning component to the social studies methods class for teacher candidates seeking middle and secondary licensure benefit their understanding of pre-teen and teen students, students from poverty, and the connections of service learning and social studies?

In order to address this question, the characteristics of the students involved in the class should be noted. The students in the class are undergraduate and graduate students nearing the completion of their program of studies. For the most part, these students have had most teacher education classes and most content area classes. Their program has included only minimal contact with students in the secondary and middle school in field experiences and none which specifically address the issue of diversity.

It is the intention of this service learning project to improve the learning outcomes for teacher education candidates through:

- ⊙ Exposure to middle and high school aged students in a relaxed environment
- ⊙ Greater understanding of students who have diverse backgrounds and abilities
- ⊙ Interaction with students who live in poverty
- ⊙ Opportunity to interact with students in the age group they are hoping to teach.

It is absolutely essential that a service learning project meet real, defined needs of community. It is also important to find an agency or activity which is open to cooperation with the university and university students. (Galantino, 2006) The class found such a program at the Crossroads Teen Center in Martin, Tennessee. The Martin Housing Authority created this program because of lack of community resources for pre-teen and teenage students. There was no location or safe place for students to go after school. The Center was in an old alternative school that had been refurbished to create a relaxed atmosphere and activities along with a game room, technology room, and homework room. Outside was a basketball court. The concept of the Center was to create a safe harbor with support for homework and a place to let off steam safely. The Center and the social studies class had a formal agreement to allow teacher candidates to tutor, coach, mentor, and otherwise interact with Crossroads participants.

The scope of the project had 10 social studies methods pre-service teachers working for six weeks at Crossroads documented by time sheets and Crossroads personnel. They were to spend time in whatever capacity they were needed. Most spent some time helping students with homework, but many simply interacted on an informal basis creating models for acceptable behavior and a place to have conversation with appropriate young adults. At the end of the project, each of the pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences and completed a survey which addressed the significance of the experience.

The research underscores the power of reflection as a means of connecting the service experience to the academic course material. (Astin, et al. 2000) According to Mark Cooper, "Community service, in itself, can be meaningful, pointless, or harmful. Reflection is the key to getting meaning from your service experience. What is reflection? A process by which service-learners think critically about their experiences. Reflection can happen through writing, speaking, listening, and reading about the service experiences. . . . Why is reflection important? Learning happens through a mix of theory and practice, thought and action, observation and interaction. It allows students to learn from themselves." (Cooper, 2008)

In the survey, the students responded to a variety of questions. The first asked them to describe the activities they performed. Some of the responses were as follows:

- Played with the kids on the Wii; mainly helped with homework.
- Talking to the teens, playing games.
- Mentoring children with constructive extracurricular activities.
- Help students with homework, played ping pong, air hockey, and other games.

The students rated their experience in the following fashion:

- Overall experience was considered to be moderately to very beneficial. The vast majority finding it to be very beneficial.

- The student contact with diverse populations ranged from moderate to constant contact. The majority of the students at the Center came from impoverished homes and diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. The students were considered to be at-risk for developing academic problems.

- The students rated the experience in relation to strengthening their ability to meet the needs of diverse populations as moderately helpful. This was their first experience in relating to students from diverse backgrounds. It is probable that this simply raised their level of awareness about addressing the needs of these students.

- Most of the students indicated that they were likely to use service learning in their future classrooms. However, one student asserted that a service learning project was too much work to include in his own social studies classroom.

The students in their reflections wrote responses to the following prompts:

“What did I learn?”

- “I learned it is easier to get to know people of other backgrounds if you put yourself out there. It made me feel vulnerable, but the payoff was worth it in the end.”

- “I learned that all at risk students are not the same. I think that a lot of times people give into stereo types when they are not aware of individual people in the category they are thinking about.”

“Describe what you think are the benefits of the service learning that you did?”

- “The benefit of the service learning that I did was the opportunity to be involved with at risk students. I think that the one on one time that I got with these students was much more important than the time I get in the classroom observing students in that situation or reading about their statistics in a textbook. “

- “Service is a very valuable experience. I feel more prepared to step into the classroom having this additional interaction with students that are close to the age group I will be teaching. I learned that diversity among students does not discourage them from wanting to learn things about me or about experiences that I can share with them. Black students, white students, males, and females all wanted me to share things with them and seemed eager to learn from me.

“Describe any weaknesses or problems you observed.”

- When questioned about the weaknesses of the program, the students uniformly addressed not the concept of service learning, but the volunteer activity itself. In general, they felt that the initial time with the students was extremely unstructured, almost a letting off steam time. After that initial half hour, the program settled down into a more structured format.

- “The weaknesses of the program are that there is not a lot of structure for the most part...The program also needs more money. They could use everyday supplies so that the kids are able to have more activities to increase the amount of effectiveness of the program as a whole.”

“How do you think that service learning is connected with becoming a social studies teacher?”

- “I think service learning is connected with becoming a social studies teacher because as a social studies teacher I should teach my students to be involved citizens. Part of being a good citizen is giving back to the community. Service learning to me is all about being a part of something bigger than yourself. I also think that that is essential is being a good citizen.”

“Will you have your students do service learning projects?”

- “I will have my students participate in service learning projects. I want my students to be a part of service learning projects because I want them to have the experience of being a part of something bigger than themselves and their self interest. I want them to get to know people different than themselves and to be aware of the benefits of giving back to the community.”

Based on the results of the survey and the reflective statements of the pre-service teachers, there is a strong argument for continuing to put this particular service learning project into the course requirements of the social studies methods course. The service learning experience did give the teacher candidates experiences with diverse populations and contributed to deepen awareness of the characteristics of the age group and students from poverty. From the responses in the survey, it is also apparent that these potential social studies teachers will in all likelihood use service learning in their own classrooms. From the reflections, it is also apparent that a more in depth and more structured experience might also help these candidates with strategies for dealing with at-risk students. The future course might include a longer period of time with the Crossroads Teen Center and ask for specific experiences which would help develop strategies for approaching the at risk youth.

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