Building Student Self-Efficacy and Mastery of Skills through Service Learning Partnerships

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Abstract

Undergraduate students (N = 40) responded positively to a semantic differential scale after experiencing a "direct practice" service learning group work course. Qualitative data documented student's perceptions of increased skill levels relating to self-efficacy—understood as positively influencing mastery of skills and performance outcomes—a pedagogical model to consider for competency based curriculums.

Introduction

Student mastery of skills and/or academic achievement is an educational priority yet difficult to accomplish (Borman 2009). For some time now, Bandura (1977) has proposed that *self-efficacy* is related to academic and professional achievement (Bandura and Locke 2003). Findings that are more recent suggest that self-efficacy is influenced by *direct service learning activities* (Lemieux 2001). However, academia has been slow to accept this learning technique (Kielsmeier 2011). It seems that service learning is perceived as a volunteering exercise related to increasing students' sense of civic duty and not recognized as serious pedagogy (Woolf 2008). In order to understand if service learning is influential in shaping mastery of skills via perceived self-efficacy, this study explored the impact of a service learning (SL) course, structured with "direct" activities, on student professed self-efficacy. There are few studies examining either "direct" SL activities or self-efficacy as an outcome of service learning activities in undergraduate seniors.

Service Learning

Learning through service in the community, or, as it is commonly called, service learning (SL) is defined as a teaching technique meant to extend a student's educational experience while supporting the needs of the host community partner (Bringle and Hatcher 1996; Mitschke and Petrovich 2011).

Theoretical Support for Service Learning

Service learning, as a pedagogical method, is grounded in experiential and constructivist theory suggesting that student behavior and/or experiences along with reflective thought, when carefully aligned with course goals and objectives, re-construct meaning to deepen understanding of essential course concepts (Dorsey 2001). Research has found that students actually desire meaningful and real life

learning experiences (Largent and Horinek 2008) and shine in such endeavors. Indeed, in a comparison study of students engaged in direct, indirect, and non-SL experiences, those who were involved in the direct SL activities, in contrast to the other groups, excelled in mastering course goals and exams (Miller and Yen 2005).

Direct and Indirect Service Learning Endeavors

Service learning experiences include an array of activities characterized as direct and indirect. Direct service learning is described as face-to-face contact with service recipients of a particular program/school or agency (host community partner) (Lemieux and Allen 2007, 311), with the goal of enacting change in both. Ideally, the student's service learning activities should be done in a dyad, rather than individually or in a whole class, and should include research, planning, presentation, and reflection components (Billig 2011, 8–9).

An indirect SL experience is described as a student impacting an agency/school or community through non-face-to-face activities (Lemieux and Allen 2007). Examples of indirect SL experiences might be a student spending time reviewing files, filing, and/or writing a report (Lemieux, 2001).

Self-Efficacy

Self-Efficacy is an individual's *perception* of his/her ability to complete a particular endeavor and can be a powerful motivating behavioral force (Bandura 1997). It is quite different from the concept of self-esteem, which is understood as a person's level of self-liking (Gist and Mitchell 1992). To explain, an individual may hold a low self-efficacy belief about his/her ability to write a report, while describing a high level of overall self-approval.

Cognitive Influences

Knowing what to do and possessing the skills to do it are essential talents, yet do not necessarily equate with level of performance. It is proposed that the influential factor in performance status is the person's *perception* of ability for a specific undertaking. To explain, the individual who believes that he/she is capable in a situation seems willing to invest the required energy in answering its demands in spite of any potential or tangible risks. In contrast, the person who thinks he/she is incapable may relinquish the prerequisite inspiration and/or resolve. Further, this individual may ruminate about personal limitations and/or imagine the demands of a task are greater than reality— further supporting their belief of ineffectiveness (A. Bandura, 1982). Nevertheless, it is suggested that self-efficacy beliefs can be modified, via, as examples, if an experience contradicts a self-perception, or, an individual is able to problem solve a successful conclusion in spite of obstacles, or a person observes a capable model with whom he/she believes is similar in character. The proposition is that positive self-efficacy is not about how many times an individual completed a task, but the arsenal of skills that the individual believes he/she gathered during the process of 'doing' or 'observing', which armed him/her for future challenges (Bandura 1982).

Direct Service Learning and Self-Efficacy

Recent findings suggest that there is a relationship between self-efficacy and SL activities (Raman and Pashupati 2002). Moreover, perceived high self-efficacy for a given endeavor (for example, the person feels that he/she has mastered a specific undertaking) appears to lead to future successes, due to a greater commitment to the work in spite of adverse conditions (Gibson and Dembo 1984), and, "once established, [beliefs] appear to be somewhat resistant to change" (Tschannen-Moran 1998, 235). This is because "direct" experiences appear to cultivate core beliefs about personal abilities (Ross, Cousins, and Gadalla 1996). Indeed, it is modeled that direct service learning experiences structured to connect face-to-face the student with consumers and service providers, challenge and/or modify the student's current beliefs (cognitive re-structuring) of self and others, and initiate various emotions that deepen the students commitment to the service learning endeavor (Dull 2011; Stelljes 2007).

Purpose of This Exploration

Over the past decade, service learning has gained attention as a teaching tool; yet, it remains questionable in mainstream academia (Kielsmeier 2011; Woolf 2008). This could be due to institutional attitudes that consider it a volunteering activity with no proven connection or possible integration in rigorous curriculum. Arguments for its unreliability as a valid teaching model are its mixed research findings purportedly linked to varied SL experiences often offered as options (or portions of a course) and outcome measures that are not based on previous research (Dorsey 2001; Woolf 2008).

Current service learning research must build on previous investigations and continue the examination of this pedagogical method as an essential curriculum component for student mastery of skills.

This study's research question was, "Does a direct practice service learning experience influence senior social work students' sense of self-efficacy regarding mastery of group-work skills?"

Methods
Participants

The sampling frame for the study was two semesters (January to May in 2011 and 2012) of undergraduate social work students ($N = 40$) enrolled in a "group methods" service learning course at a state college in the northeast region of the United States. All participants were adult and most were female ($n = 36$; 90 percent).

Course Description

This course was a college senate approved "service learning" class (Woolf 2008). As such, all student grades were based on the completion of the service-learning task that encompassed 60 percent of the final grade. The purpose of the course was to learn the basic issues and key concepts of group process and practice through hands-on training experience and evaluation.

Course Methods

Senior-level students worked in pairs (Billig 2011) and from a pre-screened list, selected a host partner (Largent and Horinek 2008). The students contacted their community affiliate and collaborated in a *need's assessment* meant to define the group topic and determine pertinent limitations and parameters of the milieu and population to be served. The students then *appraised* the empirical literature regarding the group topic keeping in mind the age, gender, any challenges, and ethnicity of the population to be served along with the type of group. *Synthesizing* the best practice information, they *designed* a group process that included the presentation and discussion of information on the designated topic. They *presented* the proposed effort to both the class and partner for comments. After they received feedback and modified the proposal accordingly, they engaged in *delivering* the group making sure to *evaluate* on three levels: how well the content was received by the consumers, the consumer's level of satisfaction with the group process, and the community partner's satisfaction with how well the group met its goal(s) (Froese et al. 2003). A *class reflection* shared the "a-ha" moment along with answering the query, "what skills do I need to hone for my professional life" (Billig, 2011). The community partners were invited to the evaluation sessions to add comments about the process and receive the student's feedback (Wells, 2003).

Research Methods
Measures

The dependent variable, self-efficacy, is a concept that supports Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977) and suggests that an individual's sense of efficacy is domain specific. As such, in this exploration self-efficacy was measured by the student's self-reported attitude about learning *group work skills* via a direct service learning experience, the impact of the course activities, and the level of satisfaction with the SL course activities (Reeb et al. 2010, 469).

Quantitative

Forty undergraduate social work students taking the same senior level course were asked to complete a five-point (5 = good, and 1 = bad) semantic differential scale. This scale asked participants to place a checkmark on a point, on an adjective bipolar scale, that best explained his/her attitude about the study question (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). The benefits of using this scale were its reliability in measuring, across cultures, genders, and age groups, most concepts using only one indicator (Bilgin 2009). Each student response provided a whole number score (5 to 1).

Qualitative

The students also were asked to complete a final reflection on their attitude about the group-practice SL experience (Ikeda 2000; McMahon 1998).

Results

Quantitative

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), this service learning course was quantitatively described by all attending students ($N = 40$) as "good" ($M = 4.9$, $SD = .47$,) agreeing with previous studies where students reported positive feelings around participation in a service learning course because of the hands-on practice that could be applied to course material and professional experience (Elwell and Bean 2001; Largent and Horinek 2008).

Qualitative

The course instructor examined the participant's final reflection narratives to identify any themes relating to the students' overall attitude about the course, perceived learning, and/or the perceived impact of the service learning experience. Each time a specified theme was observed in the student's narrative, it was coded in SPSS, according to the following values: student's attitude about the course: 1 = great, 2 = fair, 3 = poor; student's perceived learning: 1 = a lot, 2 = some, 3 = none; and the student's attitude about the impact of the SL experience on mastery of skill: 1 = high, 2 = some, 3 = none.

In the final written reflection, 75 percent ($n = 30$) of the participants reported the service learning experience was helpful either personally and/or professionally. The outcome analyses of the qualitative data are described in the following table.

Table 1
Final Reflection ($N = 40$)

Themes	Level	Frequency	Percent
Satisfaction with the SL Experience	Great	29	72.5
	Fair	1	2.5
	Poor	0	
	Missing	10	25.0
Degree of Learning from SL Experience	A lot	23	57.5
	Some	0	
	None	0	
	Missing	17	42.5
Perceived Impact of Service Learning	High	23	57.5
	Some	0	
	None	0	
	Missing	17	42.5

(Missing = the student did not respond to the final reflection portion of the survey)

The following narratives are examples from the students' final reflections:

I will use what I learned here for the rest of my career

I am glad this course is part of the curriculum, as it offered a real-life opportunity to practice what we have been learning in class over the years

We were exposed to both the negative and the positive aspects of group work— this prepared us for what to expect when doing group work as a social worker

I felt this class gave us a good understanding of how to navigate through the group process

This outcome agrees very closely with McMahon's (1998) and Kendrick's (1996) findings that students valued their service learning experience and increased their sense of professional efficacy as a result (Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Ikeda 2000).

Limitations
This study measured, via self-reports, a group of students on a dependent variable at one point in time after they were exposed to a direct service-learning course; consequently, internal validity was compromised and the results are not generalized. In addition, representativeness of the findings, due to the inability to determine respondent and non-respondent characteristics, along with potential response bias in the final reflection urges caution. Finally, variations in the milieu where the service-learning activities were delivered likely affected results.

Conclusion
This course was unique in that the service learning experience was not offered as an option (Cohen and Kinsey 1994; Ender et al. 2000) or an extra credit assignment (Kendrick 1996), but was the core process for its goals and objectives. The (SL) process attempted to build on previous research. It was important that the instructor was enthusiastic and clear about the purpose of the (SL) endeavor along with carefully choosing the host agencies *for direct service learning opportunities* (Largent and Horinek 2008). Inviting the community partners to a *meet and greet* on the first day of class empowered and energized both students and partners for the SL task.

The qualitative and quantitative data suggested that, in this sample of students, the direct service-learning activities satisfied most of the participants and positively influenced more than half of the student's beliefs about their skill level for group practice (self-efficacy), which they valued as a professional asset. These results are in agreement with findings from several similar studies (Cone 2009; Williams, King, and Koob 2002) and support the supposition that "direct" service learning techniques may be effective in shaping student self-efficacy and academic proficiency (Kezar 2002; Sather, Weitz, and Carlson 2007) via engagement in meaningful work that inspired physical and emotional connections with community members and personal

transformation (Stelljes 2007). This information could be helpful for curricula that measure success through student mastery of skills (Tschannen-Moran 1998).

In summary, accredited programs are required to provide competency-based curricula to ensure student mastery in designated outcome behaviors. Courses that offer hands-on (direct-practice) learning that purportedly build student self-efficacy, in specific skill-sets, may be effective educational scaffolding to shape student readiness for professional endeavors (Williams et al. 2002).

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