

## Service Learning + New Master of Public Health Student = Challenges for the Professor

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While there are recognized and demonstrated benefits of service learning for student outcomes, challenges professors may face using such approach for competency-based teaching have seldom been discussed. This paper describes the integration of service-learning pedagogy in teaching a project-based course on program planning to new Masters of Public Health (MPH) students. In addition to the benefits of learning outcomes, challenges from the students' perspective are described. More importantly, challenges that many professors may face when incorporating service learning into instruction are discussed. These include heavy time commitment, new MPH students with diverse backgrounds, and student anxiety. Strategies used to address these challenges are also shared, such as plan in advance, acknowledge challenges and provide resources, develop guided instructions, and tailor to students' stages of learning. Students' feedback and responses to the overall course and these strategies are presented. This paper aims to encourage more dialogue on using service-learning pedagogy in higher education and help instructors be prepared to deal with some of the more complex issues when infusing such pedagogy among new graduate students.

Service learning is a community-based approach to teaching and learning that can be a useful tool for *expanding the walls* of the traditional classroom. It provides opportunities for students to discover linkages between theory and practice in authentic settings. In addition, it provides active learning, team building, and collaboration opportunities on interdisciplinary projects (Seifer, 1998).

Service learning has been defined as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2007, ¶ 2). Partnerships between academic institutions and communities can foster mutually beneficial situations for students, the educational institution, as well as the community. Cashman, Hale, Candib, Nimiroski, and Brookings (2004) noted that one of the main reasons many institutions develop or expand partnerships, with the aim of realizing mutual benefit, is the worsening mismatch between resources and needs. Service learning is a method for students to learn and develop through active participation in organized service experiences that meet actual community needs. These academically based community service opportunities provide students structured learning experience with intentional learning objectives and structured time for reflection to enhance what is taught in class by extending student learning beyond the classroom into the real-world settings (Cauley, Canfield, Clasen, Dobbins, Hemphill, Jaballas, et al., 2001).

Although staying in the classroom is safer than going out to the community, it is often difficult for students to work with hypothetical issues when it

comes to planning, designing, and evaluating health programs. Real life contexts and interactions with community partners could help students think through details of program planning and deepen their learning. As differentiated from other teaching approaches, service-learning activities are experiential in nature; such learning often strengthens students' openness to diversity, promotes deeper understanding of course material, and provides results sustained for years after the experience has occurred (Butin, 2006). At the same time, challenges exist, such as constraining academic calendars and student schedules, ensuring that students are resources as well as learners, building effective collaborations, and sharing understanding of the approach. There is limited documentation on these and other service-learning related challenges (Cashman et al., 2004; Karasik, 2007).

This paper describes how the academic content and community-based learning assignments work together to provide a hands-on process of utilizing the health promotion planning model in conducting community needs and assets assessments. It highlights student benefits and challenges but, at the same time, points out instructor challenges. In addition, the paper describes some strategies the instructor used to address those challenges, and assess student feedback toward some of those strategies. While there are recognized benefits of service learning, challenges professors may face using such an approach for competency-based teaching have seldom been discussed. This paper aims to help instructors better prepared to deal with some of the more complex issues when using such pedagogy.

## Method

### *Course Overview and Pedagogy*

The course focuses on health promotion program planning. It discusses process and factors related to public health program planning in a variety of settings. Weekly lectures and discussions guide students through the various phases of the classic health promotion planning model – PRECEDE-PROCEED, a theoretically robust model for comprehensive health promotion planning (Green & Kreuter, 2005). PRECEDE stands for Predisposing, Reinforcing, and Enabling Constructs in Educational/Ecological Diagnosis and Evaluation; and PROCEED refers to Policy, Regulatory and Organizational Constructs in Educational and Environmental Development. The fundamental propositions hold that health and health risks have multiple determinants. Therefore, efforts to affect behavioral, environmental, and social change must be multi-dimensional. Key phases of the model include assessment at social, epidemiological, behavioral, and environmental; educational and ecological; administrative and policy aspects; as well as planning for program implementation and evaluation.

In the planning course, via learning and working with pre-selected or student-identified community partners, students apply knowledge and skills learned to identify and analyze needs and assets in the community. The final product is a comprehensive needs assessment report, guided by the planning model, along with recommendation strategies to utilize existing community assets to address the identified health needs.

The service learning pedagogy enabled students to make early connections between coursework and their professional services to the communities and their roles as citizens. Engaged students learned the context for their professional service and this increased the quality and relevance of their project reports. The course was structured around carefully designed learning opportunities and collaborative projects to facilitate students to think critically and write thoughtfully. Students worked in small groups to complete their needs assessment projects. Community partners included, but were not limited to, public health departments, community cancer support centers, regional hospitals, HIV/AIDS social service agencies, and senior centers.

### *Student Reflection Assessment and Analyses*

Each student submitted individual reflection journals (regarding their perspective on the group

project) at mid-term and at the end of the project. The planning course is offered every year to all Master of Public Health (MPH) students in their first semester as one of the core courses. The number of students enrolled in the course varied each year and ranged from 16 to 45. Students' individual reflections and comments collected during 2003-2007 were included in the current analyses (total  $n = 105$ ).

A reflection guide with open-ended probing questions was provided to facilitate student documentation of their learning and their service-learning project experience. Students were reminded that reflection is a critical part of their learning to become public health professionals and there was no right or wrong response. In addition, students were told that their reflections could be very individual and it is common they might have a different learning experience than their peer even if working with the same project. Sample guiding questions included the following:

- While working on the community service-learning project, what are things you learned in terms of program planning?
- How did the field assignment, class discussion, group application, or the team work model, etc. help you in learning the program planning process?
- What were things that challenged you the most during the process?
- How the community interactions and academic discussions have had an impact on your learning and your development as an engaged citizen?
- Students were also told they could reflect on any aspect of the experience and these probing questions were meant as a guide.

The inductive, descriptive analyses were conducted using an iterative, analytical approach (Patton, 2002). The analysis was carried out through several readings and interpretation of the raw data. Identification of codes was done by open coding, line-by-line scrutiny of the data, and those that appeared to be similar were grouped into categories to further develop working themes. All categories derived from student reflection data were grouped under three major themes that emerged during the analysis: student benefits, student challenges, and feedback on faculty strategies. Selected quotes highlight the specific categories. Faculty challenges and strategies from instructor's notes were then incorporated into the results section to complete the systematic documentation of the experience of the integration of service-learning into

instruction, both from students' and instructors' perspectives.

#### *Student Benefits*

Community-based education resulted in profound benefits. These benefits were highlighted in the following four areas (categories) that emerged from students' individual reflections and comments. Please note that the following statements are direct quotes from students, therefore, grammatical errors exist as we sought to honestly present original statements made from students.

*Community focused approach was life-changing*  
 "It really gives a realistic opportunity to put life into what learned from books and class. We gained knowledge that wouldn't have come from statistics or readings. We saw a part of community and level of health problems that did not know exist. I was amazed at the level of dysfunction that made their 'normal home' environment. We had new appreciation of the issues identified."

"The experience has really opened my eyes. I have learned a valuable personal lesson about low-income populations that will stay with me for the rest of my life."

"The involvement with community members was extremely rewarding. Their responses were so much richer and insightful than what I had imagined."

*Teamwork model stimulated active learning.*  
 "The entire experience increased our collective creativity as we were able to bounce ideas off one another. ... The group dynamic forced virtually constant dialogue which resulted in a variety of different perspectives on the same issue."

*Guided instructions facilitated knowledge applications*  
 "Project guidelines clearly laid out the procedure, lectures helped organization, overall course design enhanced the comprehensive learning experience such as grant writing skills, communications, time management, tasks delegation, and to be accountable, etc. "

"The fact that so many projects were discussed and presented helped me gain insight for our project. Working on the paper throughout the

entire semester helped the paper take its own shape, flow and be strong."

#### *Internalized learning outcomes, increased confidence and self-awareness*

"I am encouraged by how graduate school is starting for me. I have already begun to use the concepts learned to my present work. I am now taking time to consider determinants of behavioral and environment before program design."

"Upon completion of our project, I feel solid in my understanding and feel confident to apply it outside of the classroom. This project served as a good platform for my career. It helps us gain experience to be more equipped dealing with difficult planning issues in the future."

#### *Student Challenges*

Three major challenges of the service learning experience were observed. The so-called *learning-by-doing* model might not fit with the learning style for all students. Furthermore, the ambiguity and unpredictability of the real world and time commitment could cause unavoidable stress for students. Below are some direct quotes from students.

#### *The learning-by-doing approach*

"The challenge for me was to conduct our needs assessment with the planning model at the same time we were learning it, because we do not know whether we are doing it right all the time."

#### *The depth of the planning model*

"It is such an in depth model. This model looks at every angle of a problem and how to solve or approach it. That is a positive thing, yet so labor intensive."

"The most frustrating part for me was going in with an idea in mind for what we want to do, and then realizing that it may not be what our target group wants is hard to take. Throughout this process I have learned that program planning is not easy."

#### *Time commitment and constrains*

"We were challenged in finding time to meet as a group, with community partners, and to get the survey out and interviews done by the deadline for the class report. It was very challenge as all of us have different schedule, and community may not respond in a timely fashion."

*Instructor Challenges and Strategies, and Student Feedback on Strategies*

Although many of the described challenges were identified early on and actions were taken prior to and during student engagement, lessons learned from student comments continued to be incorporated into new or modified strategies to help better address those challenges. The section below described experience learned since 2003 regarding integrating service learning into the project-based program planning course. They were summarized as instructor challenges, strategies, and student feedback to strategies.

*Instructor challenge (1) – the learning-by-doing model and heavy time commitment for the service learning experience.* One major challenge for instructors is the time commitment required to implement the service learning experience (Berle, 2006). This included time required to establish partnerships, supervision and mentoring of students, communication with students and community partners regarding the desired project outcomes, and consideration of time constraints and the type of projects students can work with (Hartwig, 2006).

*Instructor strategies (1) – Advanced planning and communication.* Advanced planning and communication helped save time later and facilitate student learning. Reed, Jernstedt, Hawley, Reber, and DuBois (2005) argued that the experience can be as brief as a few days and still show significant impact on student learning. To prepare for the service learning opportunity, the instructor communicated in advance with community partners the course objective, project outcome, students' potential and limitations, commitment needed from the community partners, as well as gain preliminary understanding of specific needs and resources the community may have. In addition to oral communication, a one-page course summary was drafted and emailed to each community partner to help facilitate communication through written information. The immediate feedback from the community indicated this step to be much appreciated.

*Student feedback (1) – new appreciation of the experience and efforts go into planning.* It was difficult to learn by immersion, but I had found this to be the most effective way to truly understand something new.

“I am leaving this course with a better understanding of the complex process involved with planning and developing an intervention and with an appreciation for all of the hard work that our professor put into teaching the course.”

*Instructor challenge (2) – New students with diverse background and challenging meeting time.* The majority of the students in the planning course were

first-year MPH students from all specialization areas and with diverse backgrounds and levels of experience. Students were normally in their first semester at the graduate school in a new environment. In addition to the relatively heavy course load, this course being their first core class also made the project-based approach challenging. Many students had no previous experience working on such group projects. Furthermore, both the large class size and evening class time, when students were both hungry and exhausted, further increased the stress level. All these student characteristics and external factors posed challenges for instructors using such learning approach.

*Instructor strategies (2) – Acknowledging challenges, providing resources, and breaking class into smaller segments.* Acknowledging and informing students of the potential challenges or issues they might face could help students get prepared. Challenges previous students encountered were shared by the course instructor via direct quotes from formal students to let current students know that it is normal to feel some ambiguity or uncertainty during the process. Students were reminded that it is okay to share frustrations or anxiety so that all can learn the challenges together and discuss potential strategies. In addition, the course instructor also noted to the students that group experience and dynamics within each group may vary, and the project may not always turn out as expected. Early studies also pointed out that not all students would share the good feeling that comes from helping others, and the client might not view the benefits of the project in the same light as the students (Berle, 2006). Instead, learning the process of applying the planning model to real communities and working with each other as a team should be their main focus. Finally, resources were provided such as tips for writing group assignments, working as a team, and practicing time management to better help student transition into their learning at the graduate school.

In order to deal with the challenging meeting time, class was divided into smaller segments and integrated with activities and exercises for better student engagement. A short lecture with discussions was usually given at the beginning and followed by a break, then small groups broke out for interactive discussions, and finally the whole class shared their learning. Time was usually allocated at the end for project discussions or group consultations. This allocation was viewed as particularly important as students all had different working or course schedules and it was often difficult to find time to meet. Those informal consultation sessions were designed to help alleviate scheduling issues and at the same time provide opportunities to interact with the instructor on a regular basis.

*Student feedback (2) – Instructor’s assistance helped and class time went by fast.*

“A couple of ways that helped me learn was the instructor’s assistance and the knowledge, experience, and inputs from my group members. Assignments also helped us to organize and plan our schedule.”

“I thought the class would be longer, but you made it not as long. Time actually went by fast; dividing the cases into different activities was really effective!”

*Instructor challenges (3) – Student anxiety toward the community project.* Some students were anxious about the community project, not confident enough to interact with real communities, or view the process of “figuring things out” to be unnecessary. These were consistent with earlier studies (Kravetz, 2005). Such perceptions were discouraging, though not surprising. Besides changing student roles, the service learning approach also requires a change in the role of teachers. It is generally difficult for the instructors to plan a curriculum unit as a neat, predictable package as action precedes attempts to synthesize knowledge.

*Instructor strategies (3) – Providing guided instructions and tailoring student’s stage of learning.* Research has found out that if students go into the service learning experience believing that they are likely to make a significant difference, they are likely to become discouraged when their impact does not meet the goals of the course or the community (Kravetz, 2006). On the other hand, if we could emphasize that the service learning experience is a starting point for a deeper understanding of issues concerned by the community and a development of their competencies on needs and capacity assessment to more effectively plan health promotion programs in the future, we can provide powerful experiential learning opportunities for students. Based on previous students’ comments and feedback, as well as considerable input from other faculty members, the planning course has been continuously modified to address some of these challenges. Strategies to provide more guidance included, but were not limited to, the following: (a) adding case studies and an additional resource book to provide examples of various assessment strategies; (b) developing guided worksheets and in-class exercises. A series of worksheets, corresponding to the steps and processes discussed in class, as well as their final paper requirements, were carefully developed to provide additional guidance and directions.; (c) adding exams to ensure proper individual preparation for their group discussions; (d) providing previous student papers as examples to help students visualize the expected final product; and (e) allocating class time for group

discussions or consultations. Furthermore, the required assignments were also modified to tailor to students’ stage of learning. Specifically, the timing of field assessment was further delayed to provide more preparation time. The rationale of service learning pedagogy was also explicitly explained in the first class.

*Student feedback (3) – Guided instructions were effective to facilitate applications.*

“I like how the concept are being applied and learned. I like to learn about a concept and then be given a worksheet and then go out and apply what we’ve learned and discussed. It provided us with specific goals and tasks, and breaks the course down into manageable steps.”

“It was not easy to apply theoretical issues to community, but the readings and worksheets really helped us not getting off track and guided in what to look for; we were able to progress through the model, although not in a linear way, the class and group discussions were really helpful.”

## Conclusion

Despite some challenges from students regarding the amount of work and level of anxiety in working with real communities, and occasionally an organization that turned out to be not a good fit, the planning course using the service learning pedagogy was a worthwhile experience for most students. Such design, although labor intensive both for instructors and students, helped deepen student learning. This was evident through many indicators observed: (a) Nearly 90% of the students expressed increased self-efficacy at the end of the course; (b) About 30-40% of the students had already used skills learned to their work; and (c) Almost 20% had used these service learning experiences to apply for scholarships externally. The final needs assessment planning reports often gave students a high sense of satisfaction and accomplishment, and a quality product they bragged about throughout their program of study. In addition, the service learning opportunity made the classroom discussion more concrete and gave students more confidence in the subsequent course of program development and implementation. Students often drew upon their experience in the planning course during their development of theory and evidence-based interventions in the subsequent implementation course.

Students learned knowledge and skills in ways they otherwise wouldn’t. When they worked in group and applied things learned, and figured things out for themselves, they remembered them. Students made discoveries and experimented with knowledge themselves instead of hearing or reading about the

experiences of others. Students also reflected on their experiences, thus developed new attitudes and new ways of thinking. Furthermore, the service learning experience enabled students to learn more about the community in which they lived, to receive mentorship from community partners and the course instructor, as well as to learn to negotiate roles, responsibilities, and work through conflict with peers and, occasionally, their community partners.

This paper provides the much needed dialogue on benefits, challenges, and strategies from both students' and instructors' perspectives. Challenges professors may face were noted, and student feedback on some of the strategies used showed positive responses. The infusion of service learning opportunities in teaching project-based course is effective and demonstrates profound impact on student learning.

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