CRITICAL THINKING IN STUDENTS’ SERVICE-LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. Service learning combines community service with academic learning. Students learn and develop critical thinking through active participation in organized service experiences. The purpose of this study was to describe the growth of 94 nursing students’ critical thinking through service-learning experiences. Results revealed two major themes: development of both professional and community perspectives. Outcomes of the study provide a framework for developing service-learning experiences across the curriculum.

Service learning is an educational strategy that combines community service with academic learning objectives. Students can benefit from service learning experiences by enhancing communication skills, strengthening critical thinking abilities, developing civic responsibility, and fostering a sense of caring for others.

Nursing, a service-oriented profession, easily lends itself to collaborating with health care professionals in all settings and connecting with individuals, families, and groups in the community. Service learning extends beyond the traditional classroom and helps students develop independent learning environments and community-based partnerships crucial to the preparation of our future nurses (Poirrier 2001).

Overview

Interest in service learning developed as Kent State University, College of Nursing conducted a revision of the curriculum to include more community-based education experiences. Faculty members who were teaching beginning nursing students incorporated service learning in the first nursing laboratory course. This course focused on the development of assessment, communication, and critical thinking skills. The objective of this study was to describe beginning nursing students’ critical thinking during their service learning experiences.

Literature Review

Service learning as educational methodology is not new. The literature in higher education over the past twenty years describes numerous projects that have combined community service with academic learning objectives. These educational programs have taken many shapes but have added confusion to the definition of service learning. Sigmon (1994) devised a system that distinguishes various types of community service. He maintains that service learning occurs when there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes. Based on this framework, Furco (1996) developed a model distinguishing service learning from volunteerism, community service, fieldwork, and internships. Furco (1996) purports that volunteerism and community service primarily focus on the service provided to and the benefits derived from recipients, whereas fieldwork and internships primarily focus on the students’ learning. Service learning, however, balances the benefits of the service to the recipient, and the benefits of learning for the student. This equal balance differentiates service learning from other types of service programs.

Service learning is becoming prevalent in nursing education literature. The Pew Health Professions Commissions
(1993, 1995, 1998) recommended that service learning be incorporated into university nursing education to meet the increasing demand of community-based health care needs. In several studies of community-based service learning projects (Gerberich 2000; Scheideberg and Hunter 1999; Simoni and McKinney 1998; Sternas et al. 1999; White 1999; White et al. 1999; White and Henry 2000), there is evidence from students that service learning enhanced their education. Students felt that service learning added value and meaning both to their learning experience and to the recipients of their caring. Other benefits consistently identified by students included a sense of personal satisfaction, a feeling of professional growth, and an increased awareness of unmet health care needs in their communities.

Studies found that service learning sharpened critical-thinking skills. Callister and Hobbins-Garbett (2000) reported that nursing students listed a “higher level of critical thinking skills” as a benefit of their service learning projects. Other researchers noted the development and strengthening of critical-thinking abilities through the use of reflective journaling, presentations, and seminars (Gerberich 2000; Hales 1997; Scheideberg and Hunter 1999). However, there is a paucity of literature on critical thinking and the beginning nursing student (Sedlak 1997; Sedlak 1999), and the literature on service learning and critical thinking in relation to the beginning student is even sparser.

"Critical Thinking" Defined

For this study, we defined critical thinking as a reasoning process reflecting on ideas, actions, and decisions in clinical experience by the nursing student and others (Sedlak 1995). The theoretical framework was derived from Richard Paul’s (1993) critical-thinking dimensions that include the following key components: (a) elements of reasoning (e.g., identifying assumptions, identifying problems); (b) abilities of reasoning (e.g., raising questions, clarifying issues, generating solutions); and (c) traits of reasoning (affective attitudes including humility, confidence, and courage) (See table 1). These dimensions serve as a useful framework for describing and evaluating students’ critical thinking in their service-learning experiences.

Method

Sample/Setting

Ninety-four beginning baccalaureate nursing students participated. All were first-semester sophomores enrolled in their first clinical nursing course. Students’ service learning experiences occurred in over fifty community settings including day-care centers, nursing homes, and agencies such as Meals on Wheels and the American Red Cross.

When assigning the service learning project, we asked students to do the following:

1. Conduct an Internet and library search for information on service learning and potential clinical agencies.
2. Select and contact a community agency suitable to learning needs. United Way reference booklets available to the public served as a valuable resource for students to get ideas for community agencies to contact and services provided by the agencies. Because Northeastern Ohio is home to a broad realm of agencies, we did not inundate one particular agency. Also, we developed partnerships with several agencies to help students if they were unable to find an organization.
3. Develop a written contract for fourteen hours of service, identifying the needs of the agency, the service to be provided, specific agency objectives, and learning objectives.
4. Write an ongoing reflective journal. Journaling relates theory to service and serves as an evaluation of student experiences.
5. Present a poster session at the end of the course. A poster session highlights the experience in terms of students’ goals and implications for nursing practice and celebrates their experience with the broader academic community.

Design and Data Analysis

The study used a qualitative approach. During the service-learning experience, students developed an ongoing journal and shared their insights in weekly lab discussions. We instructed students to describe decision-making situations, including how the decisions were made, their thoughts and feelings during and after making the decisions, questions raised, alternatives considered, resources needed, and evaluations of the outcomes of the decisions. Laboratory instructors gave nonjudgmental written feedback. At the end of the service-learning experience, students made a poster presentation to peers. Posters included service goals of the community agency, students’ learning goals, and implications for nursing practice. Posters were then displayed throughout the College of Nursing for all to view.

We conducted a content analysis of students’ written journal reflections and wrote a summative evaluation of the service-learning experience, using the techniques described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Miles and Huberman (1994). We coded data into Paul’s (1993) critical-thinking dimensions (See table 1): elements of reasoning, abilities of reasoning, and traits of reasoning. Then, we clustered like ideas and patterns and examined them for themes.

Study Results

The organizing theme for the findings was the development of a critical-thinking perspective. Beginning students developed critical-thinking skills through reflections about their service-learning experiences and decisions made in those experiences. Two major themes of the critical-thinking perspective were: development of a professional self-perspective (with a focus on caring for others and improving communication skills); and development of a community perspective (with a focus on promoting health and developing an awareness of diversity). Figure 1 depicts the critical-thinking perspective model based on results from the qualitative data analysis. Paul’s (1993) critical-thinking dimensions were evident throughout each of the two major themes.

Theme One: Development of a Professional Self-Perspective

Major aspects of the first theme, development of a professional self-perspective, included caring for others and strengthening communication skills. The analysis revealed evidence of Paul’s (1993) critical-thinking dimensions throughout this theme including his elements of reasoning (specifically development of stu-

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FIGURE 1. Critical thinking perspective model.

Students’ reflections of experiences in nursing homes focused on their interactions with the elderly. Several stated, “I never thought I would like working with the elderly since I don’t have any elderly family members” or “this was the first time I interacted with the elderly and it was not so bad.”

Another student described her first impressions of being in a nursing home:

Being that I went into virtually every resident’s room as I passed the water pitchers, I really got the inside look into a nursing home. There was the odor of urine and there were people who never get out of their beds. I gained the compassion to understand that these people were most likely at some point in time healthy adults and young like me. They are still people who are to be respected and not looked down upon and taken for granted because they no longer can do and think as they once had.

The “caring for others” perspective broadened students’ views of themselves. They were able to look at situations from multiple perspectives. This experience provided opportunities to move from a “self focus” to an “other focus.”

Improving Communication Skills. Students showed growth in their critical thinking traits of humility and the development of confidence. At the onset of the experience, many students noted that they were aware that interacting with the public was much different than interacting socially with friends. Students’ comments often included reference to the need to “think before I speak.” Students often mentioned the challenge of communicating with children and with those who could not speak.

Several students reflected: “I had to think of ways to communicate with children who could not speak. I had to use more nonverbal forms of communication such as hand gestures and showing pictures.” “I needed to be patient to ask the right questions and listen to the responses.” “The experience was excellent. Communication with strangers and with the elderly was something I did not have the opportunity to do before.”

Communication and interpersonal skills are developed by reflecting on the verbal and nonverbal aspects of an interaction. These skills do not come easily, but can be fostered by reflection, which
enhances confidence and self-esteem. Students found that they needed to listen to each person and try to understand the point rather than assume that they knew the best intervention.

Theme Two: Development of a Community Perspective

Major aspects of the second theme, development of a community perspective, included promotion of health and awareness of diversity. The analysis revealed evidence of Paul’s (1993) critical-thinking dimensions throughout this theme and included abilities of reasoning (specifically, identifying assumptions, clarifying issues, and generating solutions) and traits of reasoning (specifically, students’ fair-mindedness).

Promoting Health. As students reflected on promotion of health in the community, they related that the service learning experiences helped them to learn about “real life” community health needs and health promotion services. One student reflected:

Agencies deal with a variety of services. I had a lot of stereotypes of hospice being only for cancer patients. I learned it had a much larger spectrum of what it can add to the community. The service learning made me realize what kinds of facilities are out there for children with disabilities. Awareness of the agency activities made me more open-minded about the needs of the community and how I can contribute.

Another student addressed her role in promoting nutritional health:

I mainly encountered elderly on my Meals on Wheels route. One lady was blind and needed me to tell her what the food was and to make it available to her so she knew where it was located. I found it was very important that I called the people by their correct names as I interacted with them to show respect.

Students’ experiences in various settings provided opportunities to interact with others who had sensitive health issues. Another student reflected on health promotion activities:

The experience was an eye-opener. I was shocked to hear about the risky behaviors and lifestyle people still engage in despite the various STDs and AIDS. Many people [believe] that “it cannot happen to me.”

A student reflected on the promotion of mental health through bingo:

My service-learning experience involved leading a weekly bingo activity at a nursing home. This game was new for me. Bingo promotes mental health of the people in this community and promotes socialization. My interest in the residents helped some of them to open up and talk about themselves. Listening is something I think is important because it can help individuals validate their lives and express things when others may not pay attention.

Students were able to readily identify many aspects of health promotion. The experience provided community-based situations in which students could apply the curricular aspects of health-promotion content learned in their nursing courses.

Awareness of Diversity. Beginning students often focus on their own needs and base interactions on personal experiences. This service-learning experience demonstrated a developing awareness of and an appreciation for diversity and cultural competence. Students’ experiences in the community provided them with opportunities to examine their own beliefs, values, and lifestyles as they interacted with various populations.

Students’ developing awareness of diversity demonstrated the critical-thinking trait of fair-mindedness. As students reflected on their service-learning experiences, issues addressing diversity were evident as they were confronted with cultural differences. For example, a student reflected on her experience with young underprivileged girls in a Girls’ Night Out church-sponsored program:

I felt a bit out of place because everyone there was Hispanic. I have never been in a position to have felt like the minority before. It was so strange. To help combat my feelings I felt it was important that I learn all the girls’ names and learn a little about each of them. This helped both myself and the girls feel more comfortable.

Another student noted:

I am more aware of my biases and stereotyping and being so critical of others. It helped me understand the care the elderly need. I realized what a big impact just talking to them means. It really made them happy. The experience helped me to develop my therapeutic communication.

Awareness of diversity can be difficult to teach. Students’ interactions with different people in the community provide opportunities that a traditional classroom cannot. Often the “lived” experience is the best teacher. Cultural competence develops from keeping an open mind and increasing awareness and tolerance of others’ culture and beliefs.

Discussion

Our research demonstrates that beginning nursing students develop and use critical-thinking skills in service-learning experiences. The experience fostered self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-reflection. Service-learning develops and strengthens community ties while providing new meaning to curriculum and course objectives. It gives students a valuable opportunity to develop a sense of community beyond their clinical experiences and creates future ties with community agencies.

Most students enjoyed the experience. Although time intensive, it was beneficial. “At first I thought fourteen hours was too much but it really was not enough when it was over.” “I really enjoyed it and it helped more than any test.” “I really thought I was making a contribution to the community.” “It was a lot of fun and educational even though I did not know that at the time.” “It helped me not to judge others.” “I think everyone learned a lot about themselves.”

Students’ reflections about their service-learning experiences provided in-depth examples of critical-thinking development and connection of the experience to learning. Consistent with Furco (1996) and Peterson and Schaffer (2001), this experience used planned activities that benefited both the student and the community agency and were integral to course work.

Beginning students’ use of reflective journals develops habits of self-reflection, inquiry, and verification of information. This continual evaluation of one’s thinking fosters intellectual integrity and inquisitiveness. Outcomes of this study lend credibility to service learning as a valuable experience to facilitate beginning students’ critical thinking.

Implications for Education

Many students enter college programs familiar with service learning from prior experiences in high school. Faculty can
build on these experiences. However, they need to be aware that not every course is appropriate for service learning. It must be directly related to course objectives and needs to help students develop critical thinking. Working with agencies helps faculty stay connected to real-world problems that students confront in society (Peterson and Schaffer 2001) and builds partnerships between the agencies and the academic unit.

The faculty needs to consider several issues when planning a service-learning experience in the curriculum. First, the experience should meet course objectives and the needs of the agency. Service learning is not the same as clinical experiences (Furco 1996), a common misconception among faculty members. Service learning and academic learning share an equal focus. Often faculty members need to be educated on the role and purpose of service learning. Second, the faculty needs to consider if the service-learning experience is a good fit with the course. Pertinent questions to consider include: Is it an integral aspect of the course? Will it be a required or optional experience? How will the experience be evaluated? Will current course content need to be deleted to accommodate the service learning experience?

Third, the faculty needs to understand the nature of the experience as well as the logistics of organizing it. Logistical issues include travel arrangements to the agency, safety for students, scheduling around class time, liability, orientation to the agency, and students’ record keeping of time spent at the agency. Last, faculty need to find appropriate settings that can meet course objectives and are safe and beneficial for students.

Limitations

Drawbacks to the experience identified by the students included time constraints. Many students felt that the service-learning experience should have been longer than the required fourteen hours, whereas other students expressed that fourteen hours was too long. Faculty members often found it time consuming to facilitate students’ service-learning experiences. Although those in this study did not actually set up the service-learning agency experiences for students, faculty still needed to help students develop their contracts and make suggestions for what community agencies to contact. There were concerns about the differences in student roles and agency expectations, availability of staff to assist and answer student questions, varying orientation times, and difficulty with transportation to sites.

Summary

Although service-learning experiences take time to organize and implement, they benefit students, faculty, agencies, and the educational program. As we found in this study, all beginning students developed critical-thinking skills in the service-learning experiences as indicated in students’ written reflections. We believe that this is learning at its best.

Key words: service learning, critical thinking, nursing, experiential education, student development

REFERENCES


