

How Service and Learning Came Together To Promote *Cura Personalis*

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Cura personalis (care of the individual) represents one of the core ideals of all Jesuit colleges and universities. At one urban Jesuit college, faculty members of The School of Education and Human Services and The College of Arts and Sciences initiated a service-learning project in a freshman level pedagogical core course. One goal of the Children's Literature course was to promote deeper understanding, empathy, and action in undergraduate students towards working with children in urban schools. In order to promote this goal, a 10-hour service-learning requirement was added to the course. For 10 hours, students in the course, teacher candidates and others, worked in a multicultural urban classroom, sharing multicultural literature and classroom activities. Overall, the students, who mostly came from suburban environments, felt the experience was rewarding. Many students came to realize that their preconceptions about urban schools were inaccurate. The experience made several of the prospective teachers more willing to teach in urban schools. Also, students became aware of the many basic needs of the urban schools and how these needs affected student learning. Many students came to believe that student diversity in the elementary classroom had a positive influence on the classroom environment.

Service learning links academic course work with community-based service. It is an avenue through which students in higher education can construct more meaningful and relevant experiences that directly align with the learning goals of a particular course so that theory and practice are taught in unison. Butin (2006) stated, "By linking theory with practice and classrooms with communities, service learning provides real-world exposure and engagement with meaningful local and global issues through concrete and ameliorative practices" (p. 1). A body of research supports the positive academic, social, and cultural impact service learning has on students' learning outcomes (Astin & Sax, 1998; Butin, 2006; Chang, 2002). It is especially interesting to note that these positive impacts appear to be evident many years after the service learning experience (Misâ, Anderson, & Yamamura, 2005).

Deblasis (2006) differentiated between community service and community-based service learning. Often, community service turns out to be simple charity work. Community-based service learning goes beyond charity work as it allows students to practice theoretical knowledge they learn in the classroom (Deblasis, 2006). The pedagogical strategy for service learning combines the learning goals of the course with the pedagogical opportunities of the service project (Berle, 2006). The students see the experience more than an act of charity because the service learning becomes part of the course learning goals, part of the pedagogical strategy. The community is the beneficiary of service learning, but it is also a source of information, evaluation, and validation of knowledge (Walshok, 1999).

As a form of experiential learning, service learning projects need to possess three components: (a) alignment with course curricula, (b) service component where students work with a high-need community

organization, and (c) students' reflections of the service learning experience. Faculty must link the needs of the community directly with the specific learning goals outlined in their course syllabus. This project was carefully designed to help students become actively involved in experiences that they would otherwise have simply read about in the undergraduate course. The school district in which the college is located has been declared by the state as having "high student needs relative to district resource capacity" (Learning Point Associates, 2006, p. 2). The students were directly engaged in learning how children respond to literature by reading an age appropriate multicultural book and directing the children in a classroom activity based on the reading. A crucial component after the service learning experience is the students' reflection. The reflection concludes the process and builds on service learning experiences. It allows students to apply what has been learned to a "more global self-awareness," and allows "students to transfer their learning from one context to another" (Herman, 2000, pp. 114-115). The faculty member must use class time to have students share their experience during and after the project.

The purpose of our study was to investigate three research questions:

1. What value did the undergraduate students perceive from the service learning project?
2. What impact did the service learning project have on the students' views of urban education?
3. For the prospective teachers, how did the service learning project alter their expressed willingness to teach in urban schools?

Method

The Service Learning Experience

Course objectives were incorporated into the actual service learning experience. The service learning is a requirement for EDE 121. A proposal was sent to the human subjects review board beforehand. Since the college students were already enrolled in our program, approval was not required. College candidates were asked to review multicultural literature and complete a classroom assignment that required them to utilize 10 areas to be considered in their evaluation process (see Assignment Appendix A).

After spending a few hours in their assigned classrooms, they selected a high-quality multicultural storybook to read with a group of children and extended this experience with an appropriate interactive activity for the elementary students. An example of an interactive activity and a teaching technique is that students followed the reading a multicultural storybook with related hands-on activity such as an art project or a role-play. After the learning experience (10 hours over a 2 month period in the classroom), reading a multicultural story book to a group of children and planning/implementing an interactive activity, students are asked to write a one page paper reflecting on their experience (e.g., What went well? What would they change?).

Urban School Environment

College freshman were placed in inner-city school classrooms grades 1-6, in a school with a diverse population. The school includes grades 1-8 with a total of 1,003 students. Students' racial/ethnic origin in percentage of enrollment is as follows: American Indian, Alaskan, Asian, or Pacific Islander 17.8%; Black (not Hispanic) 35.3%; Hispanic 15.1%; and White (not Hispanic) 31.8%. The percentage of limited English proficient students (also known as English language learners) was 38.4%. The student socioeconomic and stability indicators (percent of enrollment) are free lunch 86.4%, reduced lunch 9.6%, public assistance 81-90%, and student's stability 80%.

Participants

A total of 25 undergraduate students participated in the project. The students who enrolled in the class included 24 females and 1 male. There were 9 students who were not training to be teachers, 2 from the business school and 7 from the school of arts and

sciences. The 16 students in the teacher education program included 6 in special education, 6 in childhood/elementary education, 2 in early childhood education, and 2 in adolescent education.

Sixteen students filled out both pre surveys and post surveys. Six students filled out only the pre surveys and 3 students filled out only the post surveys. According to the information on the 22 pre-surveys, 5 students lived in an urban environment, 2 in a rural environment, and 15 in a suburban environment. Fifteen students attended public school, 3 students attended parochial school, and 4 students attended private school. Two students came from families with a household income of less than \$24,999, 8 students came from families with a household income between \$25,000 and \$49,000, 6 students came from families with a household income between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and 5 students came from families with a household income between \$100,000 and 149,999, and 1 student did not report household income.

Surveys

Surveys were distributed and collected during class time in the first month of the semester (prior to the start of the service learning hours) and during the last week of the semester (at the conclusion of the service learning hours). Data were entered into a spreadsheet. The researchers reviewed the written comments on the surveys and the reflective papers and analyzed these using inductive analyses to generate categories (Johnson, 2005).

Analytical surveys were used to answer the research questions. It is important to remember an analytic survey study cannot justify causal relationships but can help the researcher to recognize possible causal factors that can be further studied through experimentation (Novak, 1963).

The pre-survey consisted of 9 items. The post-survey consisted of 7 items. The surveys contained both close-ended items and open-ended items. The pre-survey included demographic items; age, gender, environmental background (urban, suburban, rural), type of school attended (public, parochial, private), family income level, and college class level. Both the pre- and post-survey asked about willingness to teach in an urban school, features that might influence willingness to seek employment in an urban school district, preparedness to teach in an urban school, and one change that urban schools should make to improve student learning. Only the post-survey asked, "What was learned about teaching from the experience" (copy of the pre-survey and the post-survey in Appendix B).

Results

Research Question 1 asked what value did the undergraduate students perceive from the service-learning project. The students' answers to the post-experience survey question 6, "What was the most rewarding experience working in an urban school?" address this question. On the survey, 6 of the college students indicated that the most rewarding experience was learning about the amount of diversity in the classroom. Four students referred to the establishment of positive interrelationships between the children in the classroom. Three college students reported that helping the children and especially helping students with special needs was the most rewarding experience. One wrote on the survey, "I learned how to deal with different children's learning disabilities. I learned how every child needs special attention in his or her own way."

Written reflections from the students offered other testimonials about the value of the experience. Some used language that referred to the value of getting acquainted with individuals from a different community. One student wrote, "Sometimes as humans, our eyes are not opened to anything other than the lives we live, and working at this school was an eye opener to another world."

Other students emphasized the connection between their college class and their service learning experience. One wrote, "I was able to bring into the classroom a lot of the topics that we covered on campus. For example, when I was working with the children in reading groups, I was able to apply what I learned about the reading process." Another student added the following:

So many things I experienced while at the school reminded me of the topics we had discussed in class. Personally, I started to appreciate what I've learned in class when I had to read a book to the class. I felt confident in the fact that I knew the correct way to read to them and possible activities to use afterwards.

For some of the aspiring teachers, the service learning project was valuable in validating their decision to be teachers. One wrote,

I personally feel that you either have the heart and personality to work with and teach young children, or you do not. Service learning is a perfect experience for college students so we can get into the classroom to reassure ourselves that teaching is really what remains in our hearts.

Another revealed, "Before my service learning, my major was undecided, but now I have decided to be a teacher."

Research Question 2 asked what impact did service learning project have on the students' views of urban education?

A comparison of the students' answers to pre-survey question 9, "What is one thing you would like to change about urban education?" with their answers to post-survey question 7, "If there were one thing you could change in urban education, what would you change?" can be used to answer research question 2. Five students responded to the pre-survey question 9, with "I would change the amount of funding for schools." Six students answered the post-survey question 7 by stating funding needed to be increased. Five students thought the classroom environment needed to be changed prior to the service learning experience, and 6 students thought the classroom environment needed to be changed after participating in the service learning experience. The big differences in the students' answers were the descriptors the students used in answering post-survey question 7 as compared to the answers to pre-survey question 9. For instance, the students stated a "friendlier atmosphere" is something that is needed on post-survey question 7. Another student responded the "attitude of teachers" needs to be changed and several students suggested the school needed to be cleaner and more rules needed to be enforced, post-survey. Students appeared to be grappling with some of the complex issues around urban education.

Research Question 3 focused on the prospective teachers in the study and asked if the service learning project altered their expressed willingness to teach in urban schools. Seven students who filled out the pre- and post-surveys indicated they were more willing to teach in an urban school after the experience. Two students were a little less willing to teach in an urban school after the experience, while there was no change in willingness in the remaining 6 students. In written reflections, one student wrote,

I have never been in such a culturally diverse school before, and I am very glad that this service learning project gave me that experience. Teaching in an urban setting had never crossed my mind before, and now I am ready to think twice.

Conclusion

Service learning did appear to contribute to these students' sense of *cura personalis*, care for the

individual, as they expressed new understanding of diverse populations and the importance of knowing the uniqueness of each child. This service learning project possessed the three components of service learning: (a) student's experience was aligned with course curricula, (b) students worked with a community organization in great need, and (c) students wrote a reflection about the experience. One student's reflection supported Deblasis's (2006) finding that service learning went beyond charity work and was a way to practice theoretical knowledge. The student reflected:

When Sister Pat [Director of Service Learning] came into our classroom and told us all the wonderful reasons why volunteering is important I thought, 'I've heard this one before.' I was skeptical about going there because I didn't know what to expect. When I went there and really got into the activities, I felt as though this is really what I want to do with my life.

The pedagogical strategy for this service learning project combined the learning goals of the course with the pedagogical opportunities of the service project (Berle, 2006). The students' reflections supported Walshok's contention that in service learning, not only the community benefits but also the student, as he or she gains an invaluable source of information, evaluation, and validation of knowledge (Washok, 1999). Many have documented the effectiveness of ample and well-supported field experiences in order to facilitate confidence, commitment and readiness to succeed in teaching in urban schools (Fountain & Evans, 1994; Groulx, 2001). This study demonstrated that similar benefits could occur in well-designed but less supported service learning opportunities as well, opening up additional avenues for faculty to use to build these competencies and dispositions outside of the traditional supervised field experience models.

Students gained experience working with diverse populations while service and learning came together to promote *cura personalis*, one storybook at a time.

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Appendix A

Assignment: Multicultural Literature Assignment

Multicultural literature allows teachers to select books with strong positive images of people from groups that have been marginalized. The table below summarizes some criteria for examining multicultural literature (Mendoza & Reese, 2001).

1. Are characters outside the mainstream culture depicted as individuals or caricatures?	
2. Does their representation include significant specific cultural information, or does it follow stereotypes?	
3. Who has the power in this story? What is the nature of their power and how do they use it?	
4. Who has wisdom? What is the nature of their wisdom and how do they use it?	
5. How is language used to create images of people of a particular group? How are artistic elements used to create those images?	
6. Who has written the story? Who has illustrated it? Are they outside or inside the groups they are presenting? Why are they in a position to know?	
7. What do the text and these pictures say about race? Class? Culture? Gender? Age?	
8. Does the book go beyond common stereotypes and correct historical errors and omissions?	
9. Is the book rich in cultural details?	
10. Does the book raise issues about social injustice?	

Assignment:

Go to the library and find two books with multicultural characters. It will be most interesting if you find one book heavy in stereotypes and one book with a rich representation of the culture. For each book write a complete bibliographic entry and brief summary. Then write a critical analysis of the book answering at least five of the questions from the chart above. Number the questions to match the table as you consider that question. Conclude with a paragraph reflecting about what you learned from this assignment. Bring the books to class with you on the day the assignment is due.

Appendix B

Service Learning Experience Survey (2005)
Pre-Experience

Write your Social Security Number in the right hand corner. Please answer the following questions by checking all appropriate answers. We would appreciate any additional explanations for answers that you feel would add to our understandings. Remember, all information will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous.

1. A. Male Female
- B. Age _____
- C. Expected year of graduation _____
- D. Race/ethnicity _____
- E. Class Level: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior

2. How would you describe your family's household income? (check one)

Less than \$24,999	<input type="checkbox"/>
\$25,000 to \$49,999	<input type="checkbox"/>
\$50,000 to \$99,999	<input type="checkbox"/>
\$100,000 to \$149,999	<input type="checkbox"/>
\$150,000 or more	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. In what environment have you lived most of your life?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

4. What type of school have you attended most of your life?

- Rural Public Urban Public Suburban Public
- Rural Parochial Urban Parochial Suburban Parochial
- Rural Private Urban Private Suburban Private

5. What is your major? (write your answer)

6. How willing would you be to teach in a **urban school**?

- 0 1 2 3 4 5
- Complete* *Neutral* *Completely*
- Unwilling* *Willing*

7. How willing would you be to teach in a **suburban school**?

- 0 1 2 3 4 5
- Complete* *Neutral* *Completely*
- Unwilling* *Willing*

8. Please check the reasons listed below (*as many that apply*) that would contribute to your willingness to seek employment in **urban** districts. If there are additional reasons not mentioned below, please share them in the space provided. Start with 1 as the most important reason, 2 not as important as 1 but still important, 3 less important than 2.

- | 1-most important reason | 2-not as important | 3-less important than 2 |
|--|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| _____ Available Supplies (technology, copies, texts) | _____ | _____ Familiarity in urban setting |
| _____ Type of Student | _____ | _____ Collaborating teachers |
| _____ Prospective influence on student learning | _____ | _____ Support of Administrators |
| _____ Other (please explain) | | |

9. What is one thing you would like to change about urban education?

_____ Other (please explain)

6. Do you feel more prepared for teaching in urban schools?

Yes

No

7. If there were one thing you could change in urban education, what would you change?