EXPERIENTIAL SERVICE LEARNING AND DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Editor’s Introduction

In 2008 the Joint Commission on Hospital Accreditation began a project to develop hospital accreditation standards for promoting, facilitating and advancing culturally competent care (Stein 2009). A survey of current practices in hospitals regarding cultural competency focused on leadership, quality improvement and use of data, workforce, patient safety and provision of care, language provision and community engagement (Stein 2009).

An article by Stein (2009), under Topics of Professional Interest, in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, analyzed current practices in medical education preparing healthcare providers to meet these new standards. Stein pointed out that while a number of studies have taken place to find the best method of teaching cultural competency "sometimes it's the unplanned lessons that students appreciate most...the informal curriculum- which included knowledge-sharing made possible by student body diversity and cultural competence lessons presented in clinical situations ....... was preferred and deemed more worthwhile than the formal curriculum of reading assignments, lectures and standardized patient modules"(p. 1679).

The following essay, written by Madonna Thelen, Director of Service Learning at Dominican University, addresses how to help students obtain cultural competency through the experiential learning. The Supervised Practice component of dietetics education utilizes experiential learning. It places interns in clinical, community and food service management environments where they must address issues of diversity. This may
include ethnic differences, but also differences of age, class, sexual orientation and background. One encounter trying to communicate nutrition education with a mother who does not speak the same language as the intern, or prepares foods the intern is unfamiliar with, is worth many hours of lecture by a teacher on the need for cultural awareness. An important lesson too, is that diversity does not always mean deficiency. As the economy globalizes, so does the workforce, and Eurocentric food, behavior and body image is no longer the majority culture or aspired standard in many communities, even in the United States (Kumanyika, 2005).

Ms. Thelen's chapter introduces the importance of community engagement of as providing service and learning opportunities for both interns and community residents. To be successful and effective as nutrition educators, dietitians must value "others ways of knowing". Internship sites and preceptors need to be seen as community partners with dietetic programs. In viewing community engagement as one aspect of cultural competency standards Stein (2009) stated "The (JCOHA) researchers argue the necessity of hospitals understanding the communities they serve, including the impact of sociocultural beliefs on patient health and perceptions of health care" (p. 1684).

It is faculty and preceptors responsibility in internship programs to serve as models and mentors of cultural competency with interns (Kachingwe & Huff, 2007). Ms. Thelen gives examples of ways to help address the culture shock some students experience in unfamiliar surroundings and to move beyond individualized and personal thinking. As educators, we must supply historical and theoretical frameworks to help learners understand differences and similarities in human experience. Our goal is to
foster leadership in advocacy of equal access to food and healthcare as a professional value.

References


Nutrition Education, as with any field in higher education, begs the question: will our students be prepared for the world and job market that they are entering? Will our students be prepared to make a meaningful contribution to their society through work and service? Will our students’ education assist them in dealing with the local and global social, political, economic and human problems that they will face?

Of course, as educators, we hope that YES, our students will be prepared to meet the challenges of their time, their society and their world. But we all know only too well, that many of our students are not prepared, especially in the areas of moral and civic ideals, as well as in areas of living effectively in a diverse world and developing cultural competence. The “market based” approach to education so prevalent in American education particularly in the 1970’s and 80’s adequately prepared students for the job market but did not do a sufficient job of advancing the moral and civic educational goals so deeply rooted in American education. “Noah Webster (1788/1965) noted that education holds a special place in a republic and should be designed to teach young people “the principles of virtue and liberty; and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government.” ¹ A crisis in these ideals began to be articulated in the 1980’s and early 1990’s as data began to reveal a decline in civic and political participation and educators began to question higher education’s advancement of moral and civic values. In his groundbreaking book on the decline of social capital, Robert D. Putnam shows that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. We're

even bowling alone. More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. Putnam shows how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles and other factors have contributed to this decline.² This trend has affected civic engagement. “We share a special concern about the disengagement of college student from democratic participation. A chorus of studies reveal that students are not connected to the larger purposes and aspirations of the American democracy. Voter turnout is low. Feelings that political participation will not make any difference are high. Add to this, there is a profound sense of cynicism and lack of trust in the political process.”³ “If today’s college graduates are be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities but also to see themselves as members of a community, as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. If a college education is to support the kind of learning graduates need to be involved and responsible citizens, its goals must go beyond the development of intellectual and technical skills and beginning mastery of a scholarly domain. They should include the competence to act in the world and the judgment to do so wisely.”⁴

Hence, what pedagogical tools are available to us to help address this challenge and assist our students in developing moral and civic values that will encourage their active participation in their communities, as well as, call them to use their education and expertise for the common good? Or more specifically, what will help nutrition students

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³ Barbara Caron, (ed), *Service Matters: The Engaged Campus* (Providence: Campus Compact, 1999), iv.
⁴ Colby et al, 7.
understand the diverse world they live in and how to use their education to serve the health and welfare of the society and the communities in which they will live and work? These are significant questions for the field of dietetics and nutrition which sees diversity as a challenge, both in terms of research, as well as in areas of representation.

Experiential learning, and in particular service learning, is one of those pedagogical tools that can help accomplish the challenge of continuing the moral and civic ideals of our educational history. “To be an educated citizen today is to be able to see the world through others’ eyes and to understand the international dimensions of the problems we confront as a nation….“ ⁵ Seeing the world through others’ eyes, diversity education is not new to education, but what has been RE-NEWED for higher education is experiential learning which can help accomplish this challenge. Experiential education is a tried and true pedagogical tool which can lead students to an ever deeper understanding of their role as citizens. Service Learning is one form of experiential education and for the purposes of this chapter is the pedagogical form that I will concentrate on.

In the last twenty years the renewed energy behind the Service Learning movement has transformed higher education’s call to prepare student to “see”, live and function well in a diverse society and world, and to renew young adults call to become active citizens. The Service Learning movement has encouraged civic engagement, a renewed focus on common good and is addressing the crucial need to prepare students for the ponderous diversity that is a part of our globalized world. Diversity education and developing cultural competence through experiential learning, as well as through traditional study is a call that cannot be ignored for educators. “As a policy statement

⁵ The Center for Global Education.
from the University of Wisconsin system says, ‘equality and diversity are linked. Failure to include race/ethnic diversity subjects in the curriculum, or to include targeted groups in greater numbers as students, faculty and staff means all students get a partial education.’ When it is done right, ‘students participation in diversity is related to changes in attitudes, openness to differences and commitments to social justice. Equally important, such participation is also increasingly related to satisfaction, academic success and cognitive development.’ Diversity matters for education!”

Service learning, when it is done well, can move students into diverse communities and can challenge their presuppositions and sometimes misguided knowledge of diversity. It invites students to learn through seeing the world through others’ eyes. It encourages the palpable knowledge that comes from experience and relationship: hearing, feeling and communicating in new ways and in new venues. Finally it invites the testing of cognitive knowledge against the actual experience of seeing how it functions in the real world – the concrete situations of local neighborhoods and communities. Effective Service learning challenges prejudices and white privilege. Reflective service learning offers opportunities for students and faculty alike to embrace a practice of cultural humility which is essential for a healthy appreciation and acceptance of diversity, and the development of intercultural sensitivity.

What is service learning? There are many varieties of definitions for Service learning. For example, here is the definition that the Dominican University faculty committee for service learning has developed:

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Service Learning is a method of teaching which combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility.

Service learning involves students in organized community service that is directly linked to the curriculum and addresses local community needs. This learning experience provides multiple benefits to the students, including the enhancement of course-related academic skills, further development of critical thinking and social analysis skills, and opportunities for meaningful commitment to and civic engagement with the broader community.

From the broad variety of definitions it is clear that individual institutions need to develop their own principles and methods of doing service learning that will assist them in accomplishing the specific mission of the institution. Community colleges may put more emphasis on Community Service learning, whereas, research institutions on Community Based Research, which blends research with serving the specific needs of a community agency. Liberal Arts institutions may place their emphasis on Academically-Based Service learning.

Common elements that appear in various definitions of Service learning are:

- Service linked to curriculum;
- Service responsive to community needs;
- Critical reflection on service and learning;

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7 Dominican University Service Learning Committee, December 2003
• Broadening the scope of learning beyond the cognitive to learning through experience.

Service learning is a pedagogical tool that some faculty choose to use in order to teach the content of their course. The popular phrase: “Serving to Learn; Learning to Serve” is often used to denote the dual value of service learning. Faculty have to see that the service will help fulfill the learning objectives for the course. The Service must be related to course content and offer students the opportunity to apply or to reflect on course content through the lens of the service they are doing in the community. Finally, the service must serve the mission and goals of the community agency.

An example of this would be students serving in a soup kitchen as part of a Nutrition course, examining community nutrition. The learning objectives might include such goals as:

• Study the types of foods that are being served in local soup kitchens;
• Observe the ways foods are prepared;
• Research the nutritional value of the meals that the clients receive;
• Find out why clients come to this particular venue for their meal;
• Reflect on and discuss the needs of communities in order to develop healthy nutritional practices in light of the effects of nutritional deprivation.

What’s important to the learning objectives is the emphasis on learning, so that the service experience is not about charity or benevolence, but rather about learning. A faculty member who utilizes the pedagogical tool of service learning needs insure that grading is measured on the
learning that students accomplish through service. It is also extremely important that the service is responsive to community needs, lest the university impose its needs on community organizations without respect for their function and purpose.

Other creative ideas for utilizing service learning in the field of nutrition or dietetics might be such projects as:

- Having students do service in a local food depository and then in small groups design a “healthy eating” newsletter that can accompany bags of food that clients go home with;
- Serving in a local after-school program and introducing young students to ideas on “healthy snacking”;
- Volunteering in a local shelter and studying dietary practices of the clients;
- Volunteering in a Senior Citizen home and assisting the elderly with their meals and meal choices;
- Volunteering in a local school to get to know the children and then making a presentation to these students on good nutrition and its importance in being a healthy student;
- Asking student to serve in a local low income clinic to study what types of diseases are present in the community that are nutrition related.

For effective service learning the course methodology must include opportunities for reflection, critical thinking and integration of the experience with the learning. Campus
Compact⁸ has provided many resources and a great deal of research on reflection activities and methodologies. These are some important guidelines for utilizing reflection:

- Introduce reflection activities early in the course;
- Ensure that the reflection activity induces meaningful outcomes;
- Utilize guided reflection tools/questions and also encourage general narrative descriptions of activities;
- Allow students to share their reflections with each other, which promote empathy and create a safe space for sharing and become motivational for students not yet fully engaged;
- Reflection activities do not have to create unity; conflict, disagreement and questioning promote critical thinking!
- When encouraging sharing in small groups, present guiding questions to maximize the learning from the experience.

(From Illinois Campus Compact: Campus Community Partnerships Summit, September, 2004)

Reflection activities engage students in the intentional consideration of their experiences in light of particular learning objectives, and provide an opportunity for students to:

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⁸ Campus Compact is a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents—representing some 6 million students—who are committed to fulfilling the civic purposes of higher education. As the only national higher education association dedicated solely to campus-based civic engagement, Campus Compact promotes public and community service that develops students’ citizenship skills, helps campuses forge effective community partnerships, and provides resources and training for faculty seeking to integrate civic and community-based learning into the curriculum. www.compact.org
• Gain further understanding of the course content and discipline
• Gain further understanding of the service experience.
• Develop self-assessment skills as a life-long learner
• Explore and clarify values that can lead to civic responsibility

Effective reflection activities:

• Link experience to learning
• Are guided
• Occur regularly
• Are Shared
• Allow feedback and assessment
• Foster the exploration and clarification of values

The 4 C’s of reflection are a reminder of the qualities that should be present when establishing the use of this pedagogical tool:

• Continuous reflection
• Connected reflection
• Challenging reflection
• Contextualized reflection
Some examples of Reflection Activities are:

- Personal Journals:
  - 3-part journal; double entry journal; highlighted journal;
  - Critical incident journal; free write journal; key word journal;
  - Activity log journal; dialogue journal
- Directed Writings
- Directed Readings
- Classroom Group Discussion Techniques
- Ethical Case Studies
- Student Portfolios
- Personal Narratives
- Experiential research paper
- Quotation Application

Aldous Huxley said: “Experience is not what happens to people; it is what people do with what happened to them.” This quotation challenges faculty to encourage students to take the experience of service and relate it to their specific course and overall learning. Reflection trains the mind’s eye for insight and insight is so important for achieving the goals of civic and moral learning. Reflection comes from the Latin, reflectere, which means to “bend back.” Through service learning reflection activities, students are encouraged “to bend the metaphorical light of their experiences back onto their minds”⁹ and into the content of a course. It is an

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important reminder that service actions do not automatically become service attitudes. The depth of reflection determines the quality of the attitude and the quality of the action.

A final point about reflection in service learning: reflection can also be a shared activity with the community partner. Often community partners want service learners to think more deeply about their experience and to gain insight about racism or poverty or homelessness or the cultural values and rituals of their clients. Sometimes community partners will engage service learners in conversation and discussion with members of their staff. Other times a closing interview with their on-site supervisor will encourage deeper thinking and insight about their service experience. Frequently, however, community partners are too busy managing the agency and the needs of their clients that they can’t devote much time to engaging students in reflection. However, if this can happen it is well worth the effort, and asking about the possibility for such interactions is important when negotiating with a community partner.

Assessment of learning in service learning is really no different that normal assessment. Again, what is graded is the learning. What is looked for in the service is 1) the completion of the requirement; and 2) what students learned, especially in relation to course content. In the experiential learning mode, student assessment should include such factors as:

- The depth of learning in applying or relating course content or theory to the service experience;
- Self assessment in relation to accomplishing personal learning goals;
- Development of understanding one’s role as a citizen or membership in the global community;
- Student insights about the local community agency where they did their service: the agency’s program, supervision of volunteers, orientation for new service learners, etc.
- Becoming self aware and challenging prior assumptions and perspectives;
- Using reflection as an opportunity to explore feelings and impressions.

It is important that students recognize the service as a way to learn about course content, most importantly, as well as to, garner insights about civic engagement and becoming a contributing citizen, utilizing their major or field of study to make a contribution to the common good, and gaining other skills for living well in their world.

Students who participated in a dietetics related service learning project reported that:

Students (91%) reported that they had acquired new or enhanced existing skills through this experience, including communication skills or "people" skills and writing and presentation skills. Many students specifically reported a better understanding of the elderly and their needs and increased ability and comfort in working with the elderly. Appreciation of the opportunity to witness how dietetics work is done in real life emerged as a theme. Students reported positive feelings about being good citizens by helping others who are vulnerable. They were enthusiastic about the benefits of hands-on experience.\(^1^)\n
How does service learning assist student in the development of cultural competence? I begin that response by first looking at the meaning of service and then, the meaning of cultural competence. Serving is not the same as our traditional understanding of helping. Helping implies that I have something (power) to give you (powerlessness) and therefore is built on a

relationship of inequality. There is a place for helping in our lives, such as, parents helping their children; wealthy nations helping poor nations; and so on. Service, however, is not built on inequality. Effective service recognizes the equality of giving and receiving. Effective service doesn’t fix the other, because it doesn’t view the other as broken, but rather as a whole human being, each with their unique story and life experience. When we serve well, we do not enter into judgment about the other or create moral distance from the other because we see ourselves as “better than…” When we serve well, we enter into relationship and recognize that both give and receive and we open ourselves to receive what is given to us. Through effective service we build relationships, rather than impede relationship-building because of attitudes of superiority and privilege or racism, classism, sexism or ageism. Learning to be effective in service requires preparation, training and reflection, just as learning to build effective human relationships requires the same.

When service learners are asked to serve in a neighborhood that is unfamiliar to them culturally, ethnically or economically, they need adequate preparation for and opportunities to reflect on and learn from this experience. There is a great advantage for service learners to accept this challenge. It will prepare them for entering the globalized and very diverse world we live in. At the same time, this presents a messy and often chaotic insertion in the classroom. As a Director for Service Learning I am sometimes met with student complaints that their parents won’t let them go into “that neighborhood,” or that they are too frightened to go into “that community.” These same issues come up in the classroom and can potentially reinforce attitudes of superiority, racism, sexism or classism unless they are dealt with and students are presented with diversity education that will assist them in developing intercultural sensitivity. These very issues offer diversity learning opportunities.
Many of our students today live with the illusion that they understand diversity or that they are not prejudiced because they have a friend of another race or ethnicity, or because they went to school with people of various races and ethnicities. These same students are often surprised to find that they have much to learn about diversity. This learning is extremely important if their service is going to be built on relationships of equality. Vicki L. Reitenauer, Christine M. Cress and Janet Bennett have done some fine work that can help faculty and service learning staff create cultural connections and help students navigate their way through prejudice, power dynamics and other forces that can lead to reinforcement of white privilege, prejudice, oppression or inequality. They have developed some insightful tools for developing cultural competency. “To be interculturally competent, you need to cultivate a mindset (analytical framework for understanding culture), a skillset (interpersonal and group skills for bridging difference) and a heartset (motivation and curiosity to explore cultural variable.) These three essential components of competence support your learning with others in the community (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). The mindset gives you knowledge and academic understanding of other cultures through information about attitudes and behaviors. The skillset builds on that knowledge base by enhancing your intercultural abilities, including your capacity to listen, to solve problems, and to empathize. And the heartset, the interest and concern for others, provides the motivation to continue the effort even when things get complicated and challenging.”¹¹

Service learning offers opportunities to develop these three components and persevere in the development of cultural competency.

What service learning practitioners can tell faculty is that there is no easy road through the messiness of building cultural competence but that the messiness of the dynamics is itself an extraordinary learning opportunity. The key to this teaching and learning is using reflection tools to allow students to articulate their experiences of, attitudes towards, and insights about the diversity that they experience in their service learning. The experiential aspect of service learning can sometimes bring forth the deeper seeded prejudices and attitudes that are at the root of cultural superiority, white privilege, racism, sexism and the other ism’s that root themselves in forms of oppression. Privilege and power need to be examined and uncovered in order to create the freedom that we claim education offers the human community. Classroom discussions about these experiences of diversity can then lead to learning about diversity and offer opportunity to build healthier, more wholesome relationships of respect and empathy. We need to open our own and the eyes of our students to find ways to create relationships that can bring about greater equality and through equality, access to human rights, shared power and dignity. This, too, offers opportunity to develop cultural humility which is essentially respect for and appreciation of differences, while recognizing the attributes and gifts of one’s own and another’s culture. Cultural humility is the ability to see, hear and feel with another, especially someone who has a different experience of life, and this recognition is accompanied without negative judgments or guilt or becoming self deprecating because of seeing and feeling one’s own privileges. Developing cultural humility is so important for healthy human relationships that involve diversity.

Service learning provides opportunities for Dietetics education to help diversify students’ learning and broaden their knowledge of community nutrition practices, obstacles to good nutrition, and underrepresentation of nutritional education and/or practitioners in many
communities, especially communities besieged by poverty. “While systems and organizations many have historically disenfranchised and isolated some groups of people, true hope for improving social conditions resides (at least in part) in collaborating with those who best understand that isolations and exclusion through their own lived experience.”

Seeing, feeling, hearing the experiences of those is live without good nutrition and access to nutrition education, is a powerful tool for diversity education, as well as for seeing how one’s own education can be used to make a contribution to the common good.

When service learners are out in the neighborhoods and communities where diversity shows its beautiful face, they can begin “to see the world through other’s eyes.” This can offer them prospect for studying and learning about diversity, about their own culture and its heritage, about prejudice, about human communication and about the power of relationship to bridge the oppressive gaps created by the ism’s that are so prevalent in our society. This is an essential part of life-long learning.

I began this chapter with the questions: will our students be prepared for the world and job market that they are entering? Will our students be prepared to make a meaningful contribution to their society through work and service? Will our students’ education assist them in dealing with the local and global social, political, economic and human problems that they will face?

The use of Service learning as a pedagogical tool in dietetics and nutrition education can indeed help prepare students for the social, political, economic problems they will face in their world. Ultimately, service learning helps students learn about themselves, about other human beings,

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12 Reitenauer, et al, 76.
and the problems that exist in our human community. Service learning also provides openings to see ways to lessen these very problems that we face. Finally, service learning opens doorways to diversity education and building a framework for developing cultural competence.