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Service Learning Projects in Literacy

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Abstract

Service learning opportunities are beneficial to teacher education students as well as the communities that they serve. At Regis University, Master of Education in Reading students are encouraged to exemplify Jesuit values through self-designed service learning projects in literacy, through which they identify and meet a specific need at their school related to reading and writing. The author describes a few examples of these projects, including comments from the students regarding how the projects have been transformative to their learning experience.

Service Learning and Teacher Education

Service learning merges the philosophical with the practical in ways that benefit others. Within the context of higher education, projects in service learning provide students with a meaningful outlet to better the community by applying expertise to a perceived area of need. As a result, there is a growing body of evidence regarding the positive educational impact of service learning in terms of enhancing academic development,¹ increasing reflective practice, and gaining knowledge from those they serve.²

In regard to teacher education, service learning has been used to increase critical thinking skills and help create experiences that transform the student into an agent of social change.³ Service learning experiences are a means through which teacher education students apply leadership skills, curricular and intervention knowledge, and principles of inclusive education within their schools. Throughout this process, students are encouraged to think constructively and critically about how they can have a positive impact on members of their educational community in the service of others. In addition, they are encouraged to reflect on the impact of the experience, not only in terms of those who were the recipients of this service, but also how the project has transformed them as a learner. These types of experiences prompt teacher education students to apply creativity to address social problems and can be a catalyst for increasing self-knowledge.⁴

Literacy Service Project Requirements

At Regis University, Master of Education in Reading students are encouraged to exemplify Ignatian principles through literacy leadership activities that make a positive impact on our society. Thus, a requirement of the program is to create and complete a service learning project in literacy that identifies and embeds Jesuit values. Students in the Master of Education in Reading program are licensed teachers seeking a professional degree, so they are encouraged to select a project that can benefit their school's population and unique areas of need. Learners must submit a proposal that includes a planning timeline and outlines specific details regarding how the project will benefit others through the application of service learning and Jesuit principles.

Once the project has been implemented, students are required to submit a written summary and digital story showcasing their service learning journey. The summary is reflective in nature and provides details on project selection and application, discussion regarding how the project benefitted reading and writing development at their school, explanation regarding alignment with Jesuit values, challenges and successes, and reflections on perceived effectiveness. Through the digital story, students are able to share highlights, photographs, video, interviews, and narration to help document their experiences. The summaries and digital stories are shared with the instructor and classmates in order to acquire

feedback and help create community through these shared service experiences.

Project Examples and Student Perspectives

Master of Education in Reading students at Regis University have interpreted and applied this service learning project in unique and remarkable ways. Some examples of service learning projects in literacy that students have chosen to implement include: tutoring disadvantaged students, initiating professional development book studies, mentoring new teachers, and facilitating after-school study halls. While it is impractical to mention all of the service learning projects in literacy that have been completed over the last several years, a few projects have been specifically impactful. In addition, comments from the students regarding how the service projects have been transformative to their learning experience and personal growth have been included.

Boys Write

For her service learning project in literacy, Valerie Schineller created a lunchtime learning group with some of the boys in her first grade class who struggled with writing confidence and motivation. She called the group Boys Write and used this extra instructional time as a way to boost their writing interest and skills. Valerie chose five boys for the group, all of whom were showing signs of frustration and disinterest during writing time. During Boys Write, the students were allowed to choose their own topic to write about, and Valerie facilitated, while praising and guiding their writing. Once they had completed a piece of writing that they were proud of, they made a final draft by publishing their stories digitally, and they shared them with the rest of the class. Since the boys chose to write about very active topics (titles included “Remote Control Shark” and “Minecraft Ninjas”), the digital tool provided some additional visual features that added to the boys’ writing motivation.

Valerie found this project to be both effective and rewarding. She explained, “Personally, I really enjoyed working with these boys in this small group setting without any other distractions. Giving my time was not a stretch or a hardship, and in exchange, I was given a love of teaching all

over again.”⁵ She also saw applications to Jesuit values within the context of this project: “*Magis* is the idea of giving more. The time spent with the Boys Write group was a calm oasis where we all grew together by giving more of ourselves and our time.”⁶ Valerie also expressed that her decision to start the Boys Write group was based on her understanding of *cura personalis* (care for the whole person), since she noticed that these boys were showing feelings of frustration and disinterest during writing time, and she wanted to address these emotions, as well as their writing achievement.

Family Literacy Night

In a different application of this assignment, Kassie Penchoff saw a need to connect families with the school and the literacy learning process. In response to this need, she planned and implemented a family literacy night, complete with pizza, door prizes, and lots of reading strategies and suggestions. Specifically, Kassie gave a presentation on the positive impact of reading with children every night. She modeled strategies and provided handouts on activities that parents could do at home to build foundational reading skills. Kassie also worked with the staff to create a demonstration video that showed some of these strategies and learning games in action.

Kassie explained that the family literacy night was an enormous success. While she had anticipated that around fifty to seventy-five people would come, they ended up having over two hundred attendees! She said that the parents expressed enormous gratitude at the end of the evening, which made Kassie and her colleagues feel that the extra effort was more than worthwhile. In terms of Jesuit value applications, Kassie expressed that this project most closely aligned with *cura personalis* since it involved caring for children and their families and contributing to the community. This project also had a profound effect on Kassie herself. She explained, “Our school population has a lot of families that tend to lead challenging lives and ... it can be very discouraging at times. With that said, this project restored my faith in our community. I felt supported like never before. This project helped me to realize that I should not be judgmental of the families at our school. They all love their

children and are doing the best they can with the resources they have. And now, they have even more resources than before.”⁷


Singing and Literacy

As a final example of a service learning project in literacy, Bethann Myers helped to create a program at her school known as Singing and Literacy. It was a free extra-curricular activity designed for kindergarteners and first graders to receive extra help in boosting their emergent reading skills in an engaging environment. The group met once a week on Monday afternoons and incorporated activities with books, music, and writing. For example, during one session, the students listened to the text of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and practiced visualizing the story as they listened. Then the students sang a song about the story, made character masks, acted out the story, and wrote about the experience. This session incorporated reading, writing, music, and art into a fun-filled hour of activity. Bethann believed a program like this was needed at her school because most of the students who attend live in poverty and have limited access to educational activities outside of school hours.

Bethann believed that this project embedded the Jesuit values of *cura personalis* and men and women for and with others. She explained, “This service learning experience gave me the opportunity to have a positive impact on society while having fun with children. I provided a service for poor students who lack many opportunities and experiences that other children have access to. The class helped to foster the students’ personal development of mind, body and spirit.”⁸ Bethann also described how the nature of the Singing and Literacy program was beneficial to literacy development. “Students were able to enjoy books, writing, and music without demands being placed on them. The relaxed setting of this class provided an opportunity for that joyful learning to take place.”⁹ She expressed an interest in continuing her involvement with this program, and she shared ideas for its expansion.

Concluding Remarks

While the nature and focus of the service learning projects in literacy vary significantly from student

to student, a common thread is the positive impact on both the learners and their school communities. By applying Jesuit principles through service learning, Master of Education in Reading Students at Regis University become agents of social change while enhancing their own academic experience through reflective practice and critical thinking. In other words, they don’t just think about what could be done to make literacy learning more effective at their school; they create a plan, apply it, and see the project through to its completion. As a result, they grow not only as professionals but also as contemplative individuals who are for and with others. 

Notes

¹ Alexander A. Astin and Linda Sax, “How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service Participation,” *The Journal of College Student Development* 39, no. 3 (1998): 251-263.

² Murray Gibson, Petra Hauf, Brad S. Long, and Gina Sampson, “Reflective Practice in Service Learning: Possibilities and Limitations,” *Education and Training* 53, no. 3 (2011): 284-296.

³ Suzanne Carrington and Gita Selva, “Critical Social Theory and Transformative Learning: Evidence From Pre-Service Teachers’ Service Learning Reflection Logs,” *Higher Education Research and Development* 29, no. 1 (2010): 45-57.

⁴ Sheila C. Baldwin, Alice M. Buchanan, and Mary E. Rudisill, “What Teacher Candidates Learned About Diversity, Social Justice, and Themselves from Service Learning Experiences,” *Journal of Teacher Education* 58, no. 4 (2007): 315-327.

⁵ Valerie Schineller, “Growing Through Service” (unpublished manuscript for Regis University, Denver, Colorado, 2016).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cassandra Penchoff, “Pizza Party Literacy Night: Service Learning Project” (unpublished manuscript for Regis University, Denver, Colorado, 2015).

⁸ Bethann Myers, "Service Learning Project"
(unpublished manuscript for Regis University,
Denver, Colorado, 2015).

⁹ Ibid.