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Teaching Forensic Social Work: Innovative Education through Service-Learning

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The high impact, experiential education of service-learning was utilized in a Forensic Social Work class to enhance student's social work skills. Students and faculty, along with another community partner provided animal-assisted grief support groups to individuals who were incarcerated. Two support groups were provided to individuals who suffered a recent or unresolved loss, one with women and one with men. Social work skills of empathy, professional boundaries, social justice, group facilitation and applying theory to practice were greatly enhanced through this service-learning, high impact practice. The added value of therapy dogs in enhancing the therapeutic process was also noted.

Keywords: Animal-assisted, grief, service-learning, high-impact, jail, forensic social work

INTRODUCTION

Being a social work educator is such a fulfilling career. Working closely with students to enhance their learning and love of this field makes every day a journey and joy as we prepare these students to embark on such a rewarding profession. Providing students with opportunities to immerse themselves in social work settings has been invaluable in enhancing their learning; however, teaching social work involves more than just attending to the individual student needs.

Service-learning is a high impact strategy that is utilized as an essential pedagogy in many social work classes in higher education. Service-learning is a form of experiential education where students engage in activities to address human and community needs with structured opportunities for reflection to achieve desired learning outcomes (Jacoby, 1996). Fostering community involvement and reciprocity are additional key elements in this process. Working with community partners to identify their needs is a precursor to developing specific service-learning projects (Jacoby, 2015). Community partners must be willing to be an integral part of the learning process as well.

Service-learning is considered a high-impact practice (HIP). HIP experiences are powerful, educational practices that promote high-quality learning and enhance student success (Kuh et al., 2017). According to Kuh (2008), these HIP courses should: 1) be purposeful and require effort, 2) involve substantial interaction between faculty and classmates, 3) include engagement with others who are different than themselves, 4) provide frequent feedback, 5) help students integrate and apply what they are learning, 6) offer opportunities to gain awareness and refine beliefs and values, and 7) provide opportunities to apply knowledge and skills to real world settings. This project presents a project in a undergraduate social work course which was designed to enhance the professional skills of students while increasing empathy and social justice.

WHY SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning enables students to put into practice what they are learning. Service-learning, which matches the values of social work, is designed to enhance critical thinking and reflection encourage self-awareness, and increase understanding of social justice issues (Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe & Song, 2016). Opportunities to engage with the community are a key element of service learning. This project creates “hands-on” experiences learning from and interacting with groups of incarcerated individuals. Lennon-Dearing (2015) states that “generalist practice social workers need to master group leadership and facilitation skills, and the best way to achieve this goal is through actual practice” (p. 544). These opportunities also enhance the student’s professional development. Service-learning in social work courses develops professional skills while influencing student attitudes and behaviors (Mink & Twill, 2012). Furthermore, the implementation of such HIP-service-learning courses, positively influences the type of transformational learning social work programs desire (Cotten & Thompson, 2017).

Service-learning can be transformative for students and help them develop empathy and an ethic of care (Gredley, 2015; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Empathy is a hallmark of the social work profession, critical in effectively conveying support and assisting individuals, families, and groups. Educators must strive to develop and enhance the student’s ability to be empathic to those they serve. Service-learning experiences also enhance the student’s professional skills, ethics and behaviors (Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Wilson, 2011). They gain greater understanding of the struggles faced by prisoners, their needs, and the criminal justice system (Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Raikes & Balen, 2016).

Service-learning has the ability to expose students to diverse groups and provide deeper insights into injustices (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Petracchi, Weaver, Schelbe & Song, 2016; Robinson, 2018; Raikes & Balen, 2016). Social Justice is a core value of social workers. According to the National Association of Social Workers [NASW] code of ethics, social workers should pursue change with

and on behalf of vulnerable groups and strive to ensure access to needed services (NASW, 2023). Further, these experiences can be transformational as the students realize the importance of human rights. Rozas and Garran (2016) indicate that service-learning can increase students' motivation and commitment to establish and maintain human rights. Community engagement opens students' eyes to needs and issues pertinent to their environment and fuels their desire to advocate for change. Social work education, such as this, can assist students in developing rights-based skills and social work practice approaches (Gatenio Gabel & Mapp, 2020).

THE PROBLEM

It is sad to think about the number of individuals who are incarcerated who have lost their freedom and then lose a loved one. They are often informed of this loss by phone and likely cannot express their grief for fear of looking weak to others (Taylor, 2012). Often, they are unable to leave the secure environment to attend a funeral service or memorial. Doka (2002) indicates that funerals are where grief is acknowledged and support is provided. Many individuals who are incarcerated experience disenfranchised grief as they cannot openly grieve, lack support and are not able to participate in rituals to support mourning (Corr, 2002). In a sample of young incarcerated men, Vaswani (2014) found 91% experienced loss of a loved one with high rates of traumatic and multiple losses. Harner, Hentz and Evangelista (2011) found 50% of incarcerated women experienced loss of a close family member. Maschi et al. (2015) found that incarcerated older adults experienced unanticipated losses at a rate of 60% and anticipated losses at a rate of 70%. These statistics provide evidence of the many individuals who experience disenfranchised grief and then face further complications as a result. Treatment for these individuals is essential to help them express their grief and cope effectively with their loss.

Research indicates that various conditions need to be established to assist the bereaved in feeling safe to share their loss. Masterton (2014) indicates it is necessary to provide sensitive, understanding processes to assist these individuals in processing their loss and feeling supported. Support groups are especially effective in providing opportunities for the bereaved to get recognition, understanding and support (Pesek, 2002). Designing and implementing programs specifically to address loss and support coping is critical (Aday and Wahidin, year). Multi-dimensional coping strategies that address physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions are recommended (Maschi, Viola, Morgen, & Koskinen, 2015). Innovative treatment utilizing animal-assisted interventions in prisons shows promise in assisting with grief and loss.

Therapy dogs assist in the creation of a comfortable, safe environment where individuals can share their loss and receive support. Wood (2015) in her study of bereaved individuals receiving animal-assisted therapy, found three essential benefits: the importance of the animal in establishing a trusting therapeutic relationship, the comfort received facilitated expression of emotions, and the importance of touch (being able to receive physical affection from the animal). Allison and Ramaswamy (2016) report that animal-assisted therapy in prisons provides a positive, supportive environment that can enhance self-awareness and decrease isolation. Thomas and Matusitz (2016) report a major reason for suffering is the isolation, but therapy dogs contribute to a growth-fostering relationship. The use of animal-assisted therapy also helps individuals recognize their feelings and emotions (Dell, Chalmers, Stobbe, Rohr, & Husband, 2019). A national study revealed that almost 25 percent of social workers are using animal-assisted interventions in their practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Social workers should include animals as a form of support in their work with clients (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molitor, 2005). Also, social workers, committed to anti-oppressive practices should be familiar with animal-assisted intervention (Legge, 2016). Therefore, it is important to prepare future social workers in this modality. The Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (2022) requires social work programs to emphasize anti-oppressive perspectives and practices.

THE COURSE

Forensic Social Work was offered as an upper-level social work elective course for students interested in working with individuals involved in the criminal justice system. Forensic social work is the application of social work practice skills to issues related to the law and legal system (National Organization of Forensic Social Work, n.d.). Most social workers eventually find themselves faced with a client who is involved in the criminal justice system, either the individual who was victimized or the individual who broke the law. This course was designed to apply social work principles to various aspects of the legal system. Students were taught about legal issues, policies and practices in various forensic settings and with clients involved with the law and legal system. Further, this course was created to enable students to work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems, reflecting on their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding of themselves (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

This course was offered during the entire fall semester (15 weeks) and met three times per week for 50 minutes. There were a total of 30 students enrolled in the class with a total of 6 different pre-arranged service opportunities they could select from. This paper will focus on one of these options, a specific project implementing animal-assisted grief support groups for individuals who are incarcerated. Four students were involved in this specific project. Additional time commitment for these students included about 2 ½ hours per week for four weeks during the implementation of the groups.

This specific project opportunity evolved from the previous semester's policy course. Students who had taken a macro course were required to engage with a community agency, presenting ideas and suggestions to enhance services within that organization. One student, a social work major and animal-assisted minor, contacted the local correctional facility to meet with them and propose her ideas. She presented the benefits of animal-assisted intervention and shared how other nearby prisons were using group interventions with therapy dogs to enhance the mental health care of those who were incarcerated. Animal-assisted intervention (AAI) encompasses goal-directed, structured interactions involving animals in health, education and human services for the purpose of human benefits (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, 2018). This facility, acknowledging the mental health needs of their large population along with limited resources, was willing and eager to partner on this project. Thus, the conceptualization of this project began.

THE PROJECT

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EVALUATION/REFLECTION

In addition to sharing experiences in the course with classmates, students completed reflection journals from this experience. Students were asked to complete a written reflection following each session. Three prompts were provided for these and included: 1) Describe thoughts, experience, observations and feelings, 2) Discuss how you learned a new skill or clarified something of interest. What surprised you? New insights? What did you like/dislike? How are the issues presented a concern to you/society? How did what you heard related to class information/knowledge? and 3) How can you apply your learning? What would you like to learn more about? How did this experience impact your future plans/ideas? Concrete examples?

Additionally, towards the end of the course (at the conclusion of the project), students had to review all reflection journals, synthesize and compile a more detailed written final analysis that included the following prompts:

1) Knowledge (intersection between academic enhancement & civic learning)

What academic concepts became apparent during the service learning (guests & visit to prison)?

How can you and other students use what you learned about the course material and are there any challenges associated with doing so?

Did this experience differ from your initial expectations? Why or why not?

2) Skills (intersection between civic learning & personal growth)

What skills do you possess that are a good fit with FSW?

Did you form any new assumptions about this special field?

3) Values (intersection between personal growth and civic learning)

What assumptions did you bring and what new assumptions did you need to form?

In evaluating the benefits and challenges of FSW, did you recognize any need for you to change personally? How so?

4) Motivation

Did this experience increase your sense of responsibility for acting on behalf of others?

Did this experience have any influence on your future educational or career path?

What personal knowledge and skills did you discover or acquire during this experience that will assist you in your future endeavors?

What steps do you plan to take to continue your commitment to this area?

Critical self-reflection is a key element to deeper learning in service-learning projects (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Final service-learning reflections were reviewed for common themes and comments. Themes of empathy, professionalism, social justice, group facilitation and applying theory to practice were apparent.

Empathy

Excerpts from student's reflections describe their ability to truly listen and understand these individuals. "I was able to listen to a variety of inmates' stories, feelings, and understand why they are in the positions that they are. I felt inspired and empowered through listening and being empathetic for the inmates and their experiences. This empathy building that I have gained through service-learning is indescribable compared to the lectures and readings within the classroom. I feel building empathy has increased my passion and desire to work within the field of social work in a prison setting after graduation."

"My ability to empathize with the inmates really opened my eyes to not judge a book by its cover. These women are great individuals who simply made a mistake in life. Listening to them and hearing them out, I learned about their lack of support from friends and family and how this contributed to their poor decisions."

One student described a very memorable lesson from the groups: "During session one, one person was very quiet, guarded and hesitant to share. However, during the second week, they were extremely open and talkative about their experience and emotions. Later in the session, they mentioned that they found it helpful knowing that the facilitators did not have an ulterior motive but were there out of care and empathy. They felt as if they could share their experiences because they had people to listen who genuinely cared. I found this to be inspiring as a future social worker to remember the importance of compassion and empathy in establishing rapport."

The community partner/therapy dog handler, a retired elementary school teacher, verbally shared how this experience was transformational to her as well. The reciprocity is seen in her insights: "As a result of this program, I have come away with a new outlook. Meeting the prisoners as people instead of convicts has changed how I perceive their situation. Do I believe everything they told me, no, but do I believe that they feel loss, yes. I had previously felt that their hearts were hardened, and they were unfeeling about themselves, others, and society in general, but due to this project I have learned a lot! I came away with a positive feeling about what was accomplished, and an expanded perception of how therapy dogs can provide a healing element in this process." She offers further insight into the benefits of the dogs in establishing rapport and fostering empathy. "As soon as we walked in, comments were made about missing their dogs or stories shared about their dogs. Participants seemed to look forward to seeing the dogs and responded to touching and petting them while listening to others or sharing their thoughts. It was from these feelings that we were able to offer the idea that although we cannot replace lost loved ones, we can find ways to make our lives feel whole again."

As indicated in previous research, service-learning has the potential to enhance empathy (Gredley, 2015; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Wilson, 2011). Reflective comments shared above from the students and community partner support these findings and offer additional evidence of the importance of incorporating service-learning in social work curriculum.

Professional Boundaries/Ethics

Presenting as a knowledgeable and skilled professional, demonstrating the values of the profession, and maintaining professional ethics are essential practice skills. These are necessary for a successful future. Service-learning provides valuable opportunities to practice and enhance professional competence (Langlois & Lymer, 2016; Mink & Twill, 2012; Wilson, 2011). In this project, student's experiences varied depending on the population they worked with. Female students in the male groups experienced more challenges in this area.

Early on during the groups with males, some participants attempted to gain information from the students, such as where they live or if they are familiar with a local bar. Preparation for some of the questions was discussed in advance with the students, but at times I had to intervene and assist demonstrating appropriate responses for the students. Following each session, time was spent with the students privately verbally processing challenges, offering feedback, providing praise, and answering questions.

One of the students facilitating the men's group commented in her reflection "Practicing diverting conversation was the main boundary and professional ethics skill that I was able to practice and develop throughout this experience. Diverting conversation must occur when a client or inmate asks the social worker a question that may require a personal answer or expose the social worker's personal information such as where they live, people within the community that they know, or details in which the client may be able to find the social worker outside of the office. Although we had practiced this skill in class, I was awestruck to understand how often it was needed within the career field. Some inmates asked personal questions to the extent it was difficult to turn it into a common statement or general response. I appreciated the real-life experience while also having a faculty member nearby to assist if I were to run into any complications. I found it challenging to find a balance between not disclosing my personal information or life experiences throughout group discussions, especially when asked, and finding ways to connect with the inmates through empathy, understanding, and emotion. I definitely became more comfortable and skilled at this as this as the groups went on."

One of the students facilitating the group with women stated "I didn't receive any personal questions from the inmates, but would receive more comments on my nails, hair, and outfits. I would simply say thank you, and move on to the topic at hand." The student facilitators did share some of their experiences with classmates in the course to further enhance learning.

Social Justice

Students gained valuable insights during this project. They gained insight into the struggles and needs faced by bereaved, incarcerated individuals (Asghar & Rowe, 2017; Jacobs & Walsh-Dilley, 2018; Raikes & Balen, 2016). They gained knowledge of the inequities of treatment and support available. This service-learning experience fueled the social justice value of social work and fostered plans for macro changes.

One student stated "After hearing the stories and experiences of this vulnerable population, I was encouraged and determined to find a way to help them. I feel this clientele needs advocates and individuals who truly care to make a societal difference. Therefore, in the future, I hope to contribute to this population through policy development and advocacy to create more successful prison experiences (like this one) to appropriately utilize the community's tax dollars and reduce recidivism rates by helping individuals address unresolved issues."

Another student wrote "Grief is something that everyone deals with and when you are on the outside there are plenty of resources available for people to go and get help. It is harder to do that while incarcerated; therefore, we as social workers need to provide them with an equal opportunity just like everyone else. Providing them with resources to resolve their loss will only help them adapt more effectively in the future."

Class discussion about social justice was particularly lively as students engaged in this project shared their experiences with classmates. This discussion really fostered students plans for advocacy and the importance of addressing social justice in their future professions.

Group Facilitation

Students gained valuable group practice experience during this service-learning project. “Throughout this experience, I gained awareness in understanding appropriate discussion and balance of speaking and listening as a facilitator. I learned tactics to balance client ventilation and to intervene to be sure the topic of discussion stays on track with the purpose of the group.” As supported by Lennon-Dearing (2015), practice is the best way to teach group facilitation skills.

One student recalled the challenges of group facilitation: “The hardest thing for me when conducting the groups was giving feedback on some of the comments and stories. Some things I’ve never experienced personally, so it’s hard to relate, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. What helped the most was actively listening. This is the number one skill I used engaging with the participants, restating certain things they mentioned, showing that I care about what they are sharing with me and making sure I understood what they were telling me.”

The informal review of sessions that took place immediately following group was especially beneficial in enhancing student learning and skill in group facilitation. Students seemed most eager to learn strategies for group practice. Suggested statements and strategies were offered to students that they implemented in future groups. In-class sharing was also valuable to other students as these group facilitators talked about the above challenges. It was necessary to integrate additional resources/readings to enhance the student’s group facilitation and leadership skills. We discussed the value and role of co-facilitators in helping during especially challenging groups.

Applying Theory to Practice

Learning about grief reactions and tasks of grieving are common course concepts, but being able to witness these experiences, respond therapeutically, and apply an intervention to facilitate recovery is another experience altogether. Prior to group facilitation, students were provided with information on Worden’s (2008) theory on the tasks of grief and relevant worksheets from Zamore and Leutenberg’s (2008) *Grief Work: Healing from Loss*. We discussed which worksheets would be useful in facilitating these tasks. These selected worksheets were the ones used to assist in group facilitation and sharing.

Students found great value in this service-learning experience. “We were able to identify worksheets that corresponded to Worden’s (2008) tasks of grieving and help the participants express their feelings while working through these tasks. It was beneficial to see how theories directly relate to social work practice. This will help with my future job and internship because I plan to continue working in the prison system and conducting different groups.”

One student concluded “Although learning theory and concepts within the classroom is an integral part to prepare for a career, I believe taking the theories to real-life practice is imperative. I have found understanding theories to make more sense through real-life scenarios as well as live demonstration as found in service-learning opportunities. Because of this, I would recommend various higher education programs as well as community partners engage students in service-learning opportunities in order to better prepare us for a successful future.”

During our post-group reviews, we shared feelings on the worksheets ability to facilitate the desired task. Students shared what went well and what were challenges, and we processed strategies to improve. In class, the person-centered approach was often discussed as students shared how they were applying the components of this theory, including the therapeutic alliance, acceptance, empathic listening, reflection of feeling and active listening (Bohley, 2022). Students shared how they were successfully applying these in their projects. More learning occurred from challenges shared, however, as students discussed difficulty identifying strengths or barriers in carceral settings.

CONCLUSION

This valuable service-learning project provided numerous professional and personal benefits to students, community partners and recipients of this intervention. Students gained valuable experience in demonstrating empathy, practicing professional boundaries/ethics/skills, developing social justice, facilitating groups and applying theory to practice. It was a transformational experience that helped students take their learning to the next level, enhanced confidence and guided them toward their futures. It was also transforming for the community partner as she altered her perspectives and contributed to enhancing the lives of an often forgotten, disregarded group. For the faculty, this project reinforced the value and multiple benefits service-learning has to offer to social work students, clients in need and community partners.

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