

Combining Learning and Community Engagement through Service Learning Projects

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Introduction/Need for Innovation/Idea

Priority four of the National Research Agenda states that learners should be engaged in active learning environments, one that will prepare them for careers in the 21st century workforce. Service learning engages students in an experiential setting while promoting student learning, student development, and community engagement (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Sax & Astin, 1997). Several years ago, beginning teachers and principals emphasized that pre-service agriculture teachers needed more training working with students with special needs. Research studies such as Andreasen, Seevers, Dormody, & VanLeeuwen (2007) and Elbert & Baggett (2003) also reported that agricultural teachers needed more skills related to working with individuals with special needs and disabilities.

At North Carolina State University, a course was created that focused on teaching diverse learners in agricultural education. As with any course, exposing students to real life situations can bring learning to a higher level and give students the experience needed to be successful in future careers. Within the course, students are exposed to the history and education of diverse populations while emphasizing the planning and facilitating of teaching strategies to assist those with special needs become successful in the agricultural classroom. A service learning project was created to allow students to work with local programs designed for teens and adults (friends) with development disabilities and students with visual impairments.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

When the idea of aligning a service learning project with teaching diverse learners was first planned, surprisingly the biggest obstacle was finding a community partnership who welcomed us with open arms and understanding. An understanding that these students lacked experience working with individuals with special needs and may make mistakes but this was a learning experience. After many emails and networking, an organization was found and then another organization was added the following year. Planning begins the semester prior to the course starting and allows for both the students and community organization to gain the most from the experience. With one community partnership, students visit during the scheduled lab time. For the other, students visited one night a week after the friends finished their school day. Part of the planning also included finding one big project that could be a permanent fixture for the organization such as raised beds or a compost bin made from wood pallets in addition to smaller agricultural projects that aligned with curriculum being taught at each of the centers. For example, one lesson taught friends about planting vegetables and herbs that were later harvested and used in cooking classes at the center.

During course lab time, students and the instructor developed and taught small agricultural projects that allowed students to work directly with the friends. The students work with an individual or a small group depending on the project and the severity of the disability to complete the various projects. Materials were purchased so that each participant or group was able to complete the activity. For the first two sessions, the instructor planned out the activities and explained modifications needed for the friends. After the first two sessions, students worked in groups to develop and implement a lesson plan with modifications. Students reflected after each lab session on what went well, changes, and their overall thoughts on what occurred.

Results to Date/Implications

Upon reading reflections and student pre and post surveys, student comfort level

increased and students felt better prepared to make modifications to lesson plans and classroom activities. “I was nervous about talking and working with the friends and these individuals came up and were really excited. It sort of made me think how I should be more like that” (Student A). As an instructor, I saw students excited about lab sessions and they truly developed a bond with the friends at both locations. Student B said “When we left the center, all the friends were sad. It made me feel like I made a difference and learned a lot at the same time.” Many students were like “Student B” discussing the giving back component while learning. Concluding thoughts from the past two years illustrate Bringle and Hatcher’s (1996) findings that new life is brought to the classroom, the real life setting increases student interest, and teaching is more enjoyable while the learning is enhanced. The most rewarding factors were reading the reflections and seeing statements such as Student C’s statement: “No one friend is similar. They all have a variety of strengths, gifts, talents, and knowledge. Realizing this made me think about all the great things these students could do in a classroom. It would be such a joy to teach them.” In addition, beginning teachers who experienced the service learning project shared the following: Teacher #1, “I am constantly using different techniques and activities that were implemented with the service project in my own classroom as I modify lesson plans to meet the needs of my students.” Teacher #2 “Because of the service learning projects, I have goals for developing a livestock show for students with special needs in our FFA chapter. The FFA members would work with students to help train students with special needs on showing livestock. I think this would help build community partnerships between several groups.”

As an instructor, reading quotes such as those listed above remind you of the importance and benefits that service learning projects can have on developing strong pre-service teachers. The connection to coursework in addition to engaging the community provide students with an experience they will always remember and perspectives they would not have experienced from inside the four walls of a classroom.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Every year, I try to find new community partnerships to provide students with more out of the classroom experiences. The latest component for this year involved visits that emphasize cultural components. I am excited for students to see community organizations devoted to specific cultures and agriculture. This fall, I also assisted a former student from the course in planning a fall agricultural festival for one of the community organizations. It was great to see ten student agricultural organizations volunteering their time to host a booth at the festival. They too felt the joys of working with community organizations devoted to helping individuals with special needs.

Cost/Resources Needed

Luckily, departmental funds cover the cost of reserving university vans, travel to and from the sites, and a small budget for purchasing supplies. Various community businesses also donate to the program which helps fund the bigger projects and some of the smaller projects. Students are given a budget to plan their experiential activities prior to the lab. If a student has an idea that goes above their budget then we look to those businesses to support the project. For service learning projects, businesses are happy to donate because of the learning and service to the community.

References

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