



SMU Service-Learning Connection

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“We can really do something to change the world. The time has come to stop talking and start taking some action. If everyone who wants to see an end to poverty, hunger and suffering speaks out, the noise will be deafening.”
Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Insights from a Service-Learning Instructor

This month, Joe Macchia interviewed long-time service-learning instructor and advocate Dr. Barbara Morganfield of the Center for Teacher Education in the School of Education and Human Development to discuss her experiences teaching Literacy and Society (EDU 2355). The first series of questions focus on general observations ranging from her strong support of service-learning to what hopes she has for her students and what they walked away with. Later, we turn back to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, specifically that of goal two, *To achieve Universal Primary Education*.

As with most forms of instruction, service-learning outcomes are not always set in stone. One’s objectives may need to change and the approach deviate from the initial course in order to obtain the desired results. Morganfield explains one attempt she made that did not glean the results she was hoping for. She shares how she overcame the frustration with that first assignment and how she modified her approach. Following are comments and suggestions on how one instructor plays her part in bringing awareness of the Millennium Development Goals into the classroom and how to empower SMU students to take action and make a positive change in assuring that primary education is obtainable for every human person.

Why are you so committed to service-learning?

In my experience, I have found that when I am able to apply what I’m learning through a related experience, I have a deeper understanding of the content. The experiential component of the classroom provides a structure that helps students meet course objectives by connecting what they’re learning with their service experience. The service piece is in place to help foster academic growth, leadership and civic responsibility.

As an educator, what do you hope to instill in your students and what do you hope they get out of their service-learning experience?

My primary goal is to help students make connections between what they are learning through readings about service learning and literacy development of middle school students with their experiences as a tutor and mentor. While I want them to be able to reflect on the impact their service has on the students we serve and how that relates to our society, I also want them to see how service impacts their life. I want them to develop appropriate attitudes and skills related to service learning and to be able to internalize how this experience relates to them and the larger society. It is

also important for me that my students see how this experience can enhance learning in other coursework and to increase their ability to accommodate diversity and enhance general professional development.

What benefits have you witnessed thus far?

Through observations and student writing and reflections, I have found that the SMU students have gained a sense of accomplishment and a better understanding of what it means to be a service provider. Many of their reflections discuss an increased awareness of the disparities between their experience in middle school and those of the students we serve. They question the effectiveness of the educational system in meeting the needs of all of the students and express a sense of civic responsibility for working with students who are at risk of falling through the cracks. They share with me that they have developed strong connections with the students they mentor and have seen improvement in the communication skills and academic achievement of the students with whom they work. As far as the students we work with in the middle schools, they have shown improvement in their academics and we have observed improved communication skills and increased participation in school work. The middle school students also report they have a better understanding of what college is and that it is something within their reach.

What suggestions would you have for a member of the faculty hesitant to participate service- learning?

Be flexible! I have learned through this experience that I have to be willing to adjust to the needs of the group we are serving and sometimes it might mean I have to make some changes to my objectives. It is also important, I think, for the instructor to be willing to take a risk, to jump in and get started. I have found that it is important for me to continually reflect and re-adjust in order to make it a quality learning environment for my students as well as the students we are serving. I have found it helpful to be willing to adapt to constraints of working with another entity and to continually question and examine what I'm doing and how I can make it better.

You mentioned that you had to restructure your previous project. What did you see was not working and how and what did you do differently this time? What do you hope to accomplish with the change?

What I learned from the first time teaching the course was that most of my students met the objectives of the course and came away with a sense of "feeling good" and "doing good". This is great, but I felt like something was missing. This semester, I want to take the students a step further – to truly understand the impact this experience has on them as members of our society and to learn to question why there is such a disparity in the experiences students have in education. I want them to learn how to become advocates for the changes they see need to be made in order to eliminate the inequities of the system.

How do you as an educator tie in course subject matter with real life social issues? UN Goals?

The nature of the course deals directly with the social issue of public education – what's working and what's not. It helps students see where there may be inequities and, hopefully will provide them with the knowledge

and skills to continue to be an advocate for quality public education. The MDGs are new to the students. None in my class had heard of them before and so I have been introducing them to the goals. We have also been reading about the Global Youth Service Day and are working toward having the middle school students participate in a service project so they can be a part of the global youth service movement.

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