Chapter 5
Service-Learning in Action: Students, Inmates, and a Storybook Project

Lindsay A. Blumer
Ripon College, USA

ABSTRACT

This case study explores a unique service-learning program from inception to evaluation through the in-depth examination of community relationships, outcomes students have attained and the ongoing community benefits. The case study demonstrates specific service-learning implementation techniques and reflection processes that challenge students to apply their experiences to their own educational goals and experiences. At Ripon College the Center for Social Responsibility supervises a successful and innovative service-learning program; the Storybook program. In collaboration with the Green Lake County Correctional Facility (GLCCF) this program has college students meet with inmates to select and practice reading children’s books on video. The book and recording are sent to the inmate’s child(ren) to maintain familial relationships during incarceration. Based firmly in adult literacy pedagogy this service-learning experience has multiple simultaneous psycho-social outcomes for all involved.

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INTRODUCTION

Educating students to be conscientious and engaged members of a community has long been a goal of higher education. In order for students to learn the skills necessary to understand communities and the social and economic issues they face, colleges and universities employ the experiential learning method of service-learning. David Kolb in his model of experiential learning posits that learning occurs through a continuous cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Service-learning not only provides students with opportunities for “concrete experiences” and “experimentation,” several studies have demonstrated the positive effects of service on students (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999).

At Ripon College, a small private liberal arts college in rural Wisconsin, the Center for Social Responsibility supports faculty in developing, sustaining and assessing service-learning opportunities using Kolb’s model. Students experience service-learning throughout their academic careers in a myriad of ways, departments and community-based organizations. One of the most successful and innovative programs that the Center supervises is the Storybook program in collaboration with the Green Lake County Correctional Facility (GLCCF). This program encourages college students to meet with inmates to select and practice reading children’s books. When the inmate is comfortable the students film the inmate reading the children’s book as if they were reading to their own child(ren). The DVD and a copy of the book is then sent to the inmate’s child(ren) at no cost to the inmate or the inmate’s family.

BACKGROUND

Social Issue Addressed through the Program

While this case study focuses on a specific service-learning experience at a higher education institution it is relevant to briefly describe the social issue addressed in the service-learning experience. Incarcerated individuals in the United States generally attain lower levels of education prior to incarceration and therefore tend to have lower literacy skills when measured while incarcerated (Haigler et. al, 1994). Additionally, significantly more inmates report having a learning disability or a mental/emotional condition than the general population. The proficiencies of inmates with a learning disability are significantly lower than those of inmates reporting no learning disability or reporting a disability other than a learning disability and also lower than the individuals with a learning disability who are not incarcerated. (Haigler et. al, 1994).
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