

Bringing Gerontology Curriculum to Life Through Service Learning

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Why would a twenty-something student enroll in a gerontology course? This is a question I ask my Introductory Gerontology course undergraduate students at the beginning of each semester. A mere handful profess a true interest in learning more about the aging process because of their grandparents. Fewer still insightfully say they want to learn more about their own aging process. Most admit that the course either: a) fulfills an intensive writing requirement and/or b) fits into their schedule. A few brave souls actually confess to not knowing what the word “gerontology” means.

What, then, to do with this “captive audience” to convey the importance of studying older adults? How can I make the course material more real and relevant to my students? I have found the answer and it is with *service learning*.

The National Service Learning Warehouse (www.servicelearning.org) defines service learning as “... a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” Furthermore, “Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity will change both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content.”

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (1990), service learning:

- Promotes learning through active participation in service experiences
- Provides structured time for students to reflect by thinking, discussing and/or writing about their service experience
- Provides an opportunity for students to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations
- Extends learning beyond the classroom and into the community
- Fosters a sense of caring for others

Instructors considering the incorporation of service learning into a course should consider the following:

- Meaningfully incorporate the service learning requirement into the course description and course objectives (e.g., upon successful completion of this course, the student will be able to apply and evaluate the relevance of gerontology theory to real-life observations of and interactions with older adults).

- Decide how service learning hours will fit into the course (i.e., hours in addition to regular class meeting time, hours substitute for a portion of class meeting time).
- Create course assignments that help students connect service learning experience with course content (e.g., service learning journals) and provide in-class time for debriefing and collaborative problem-solving.
- Find service learning sites that can provide hands-on experience with older adults. It is important to meet with site supervisors to clarify expectations and explain how the service learning enhances classroom learning. Give supervisors a copy of your syllabus and assignments.
- Introduce service learning to students at the beginning of the term and provide a clear explanation about how service learning differs from volunteering. Be very clear about student expectations (e.g., professional behavior, including attire, timeliness, not using cellular phones during service learning).
- Provide students with the opportunity to learn more about the service learning sites before choosing a site (e.g., post brief descriptions of each site, arrange for a service learning fair, where site representatives present students with information about their agencies).

It was not difficult to modify an existing course to include a service learning requirement and I firmly believe that the effort has resulted in higher student satisfaction with the class. Most importantly, student comments about participation in service learning have indicated that it allows students to learn about gerontology in a manner not possible in the traditional classroom environment. One student commented: "I have learned a great deal from my service learning experience. Working at [an assisted living facility] has taught me so much about Alzheimer's disease. Before I began this volunteer experience, I knew nothing about the disease. I also had never met anyone that had the disease. In order to be able to work there and understand what was going on, I read a great deal about Alzheimer's...I had the opportunity to work with early dementia and advanced Alzheimer's. I was also given the experience of working in assisted living. I made an effort to meet and try to learn all the resident's names. I learned how to talk with people with Alzheimer's. I was taught that there are right ways and wrong ways to handle a situation when a resident may be upset or agitated."

If you are interested in more information about incorporating service learning into one of your classes, please email me: mclaver@csulb.edu for a copy of **Bringing Gerontology Curriculum to Life: Service Learning**, presented at the 2009 American Society on Aging/National Council on Aging Conference.