Integrating Service-Learning Pedagogy Into Community College Coursework:
A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Developmental students face significant academic and life challenges as they pursue a college degree. As students in developmental studies often struggle to complete their courses, research focused on innovative pedagogy that engages students while developing skills is needed. This project sought to investigate implementing an on-campus, service-learning (SL) component into developmental reading courses. Students participated in SL by reading to children at the on-campus Early Childhood Center (ECC) one time per week, during scheduled class, with time provided for structured metacognition through reflective journals. A phenomenological approach was used for this study, and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to examine responses and note trends in data. It was found that students who participated in SL as part of their developmental reading course reported multiple positive effects such as developing a positive academic mindset, improving self-efficacy, and increasing motivation to read.

KEYWORDS

Developmental Education, Motivation, Reading

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, developmental education at the community college level has come under scrutiny, and there is a growing concern that traditional models of instruction contribute to the challenges students face in these programs (Weisburst, Daugherty, Miller, Martorell, & Cossairt, 2017). At community colleges, there are often significantly low retention and graduation rates and these rates are even lower for students who are placed into developmental education coursework (Hodara & Smith-Jaggars, 2014). As students in developmental studies often struggle with course completion, research focused on engaging and innovative pedagogy that develops academic skills is needed. Colleges have been developing innovative ways to reform developmental education, including models such as augmented coursework, learning communities, accelerated or compressed learning, and adding tutoring and other college resources (Weisburst et al., 2017). These models aim to increase student retention and success rates; yet, many students still face obstacles both inside the classroom and within their lives outside

college. Since developmental education attempts to address the academic, social, and psychological needs of a unique student population, service-learning (SL) is one approach that may positively affect student retention and academic achievement. SL may also address the diverse educational, social, and career needs of developmental students, while providing services to the local community, and building college and community relations. Students who are enrolled in developmental courses within community colleges are an at-risk population in need of support through purposeful pedagogy (Prentice, 2009). As developmental education evolves through the implementation of innovative pedagogy, such as with SL integration, it is important to maximize the educational experiences and outcomes for these students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of implementing SL into developmental reading courses at the community college level. A phenomenological approach was used with reflective journaling as the data source for this study. Reflective journaling was used as a structured method of ensuring that SL activities connected to the academic outcomes, while exploring students' perspectives and experiences during SL participation. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the data analysis method. Research pertaining to innovative methodologies for developmental education is still growing (Weisburst et al., 2017), and this study aims to add to that growing body of literature.

Literature Review

Service learning can be described as a triad of factors that include community engagement, reflection, and academic learning (Prentice & Robinson, 2014). From a programmatic point of view, SL is a versatile form of learning that can be applied to a variety of settings and for a variety of academic outcomes within higher education (Fisher, Sharp, & Bradley, 2017). According to the Association of Experiential Education (2018.), SL, which falls under the umbrella of experiential learning, can be described as an academic program where educators, "Purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities" (para. 2). Through SL, students are often exposed to meaningful activities that apply to their course or career outcomes (Su-I & Pereira, 2017). A common goal of SL is "to produce confident, competent, and competitive professionals through the means of service learning and professional experiences" (Fisher et al., 2017, p. 188).

From a pedagogical point of view, SL can be used to create meaningful and engaging educational experiences. The community service organization, *Learn and Serve America*, notes that SL has become widespread in the United States (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). As such, SL is a pedagogy in which students engage in community service that enhances their understanding of course concepts and enables them to make contributions to their communities (Rhodes & Davis, 2001). SL programs have been shown to positively impact the community receiving services, as well as the institution sponsoring the program (Billig, 2009). Further, through enhanced and engaging curricular offerings, student participants were shown to benefit on social, emotional, and academic levels (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009).

Traver, Katz, and Bradley (2014) found that SL experience can impact student empathy and cultural competence at the community college level. Evidence supporting the beneficial role of SL for community college students was reported in the results of several national studies conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges. These studies were reviewed by Prentice and Robinson (2014) who found that survey and focus group analysis showed self-reported, positive gains for community college students in terms of increased capacity in the areas of civic responsibility, critical thinking, academic development, and career development, while fostering the ability to collaborate with others. Similar results were found with community college students at one City University of New York (CUNY) college, in which there was an increase in self-reported confidence in course content knowledge, general education knowledge, and workplace skills (Ellerton et al., 2015).

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