SERVICE-LEARNING AND DEAF STUDIES
IN THE COMMUNITY

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Deaf studies is typically defined as the study of Deaf people, signed language, cultural behaviors, and idiosyncrasies of the Deaf population through sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives. Through the development of civic sensitivity, participation in building a civil society leading to global citizenship and interdependence, the technique of service-learning can enhance a Deaf studies program. Service-learning empowers students as agents of positive social change. Service-learning in Deaf studies provides the opportunity to build strong reciprocal relationships with a variety of community partners and provide benefits to many constituencies. In a field where the connection between the classroom experience and cultural, experiential, and linguistic immersion into the Deaf community is critical, service-learning provides the missing link. While application of service-learning in the field of Deaf studies is still in its infancy, those who have used this pedagogy have found it to be an effective way to achieve many goals, including a multicultural education. This chapter will address the rationale, benefits, pedagogical issues, and research progress related to the application of service-learning to the field of Deaf studies.

Service-Learning in Deaf Studies

Multicultural Service-Learning

Marilynne Boyle-Baise (2002) emphasizes the value of a multicultural perspective in service-learning, and Deaf studies provides an excellent opportunity for this. As part of the global diverse society, the Deaf community has a distinct culture with its signed language, and unique behaviors, idiosyncrasies, and benefits to offer to the community-at-large. Boyle-Baise identified four fundamental concepts regarding the multicultural aspects of service-learning, which this chapter will apply to service-learning in Deaf studies.

Boyle-Baise's first concept suggests that multicultural education should include a touchstone with disenfranchised communities that are authentic, provocative, and deeply felt. Through service-learning in Deaf studies, students interact with members of a community often perceived as disenfranchised, but which offers rich opportunities for linguistic and cultural learning opportunities. This perception of disenfranchisement can be alleviated following the implementation of experiences that break the cycle of traditional thinking. The goal of service-learning in the field of Deaf studies—changing the mindset of students at an early point in their careers—can lead to new perspectives on social justice (Cooper, Cripps, & Reisman, 2013).

The second concept proposed by Boyle-Baise states that community-based learning should afford opportunities to make personal connections with people from groups other than one's own. Service-learning in the Deaf community allows students to have consistent and personal exposure to people like and unlike themselves, and to develop understanding and sensitivity based on meaningful relationships. In these experiences, students have the opportunity to see the language and culture of the Deaf community come to life.

Boyle-Baise's third concept suggests that service-learning should offer a structure for community-based learning, collaborative in intent, responsive to local needs,
reflective upon experiences, and integrated into course content. Providing experiences that focus on reciprocity among the Deaf community, the educational institution, and community partners, Deaf studies students can successfully engage in activities that allow them to learn, work with agencies in the community, and provide much-needed service in the community (Cripps & Cooper, 2012). Using the model, students have opportunities for applying classroom material and skills through a series of guided reflection experiences.

Finally, Boyle-Baise suggests that community-based learning should balance school-based preservice practicums with culturally diverse and low-income populations. Boyle-Baise suggests that service-learning, unlike practica or internships, presents real, responsive reasons for students to be in the community, utilizing engagement in needed and worthwhile tasks to serve communities. Deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL) represent a community rich in language and culture (Padden, 1980; Rutherford, 1988) which is often overlooked. While not all Deaf people fit into the “low income populations,” there are Deaf people who do as a result of problems with literacy, discrimination, underemployment, and unemployment (Siegel, 2000). Service-learning provides students with valuable exposure to both learn from and provide services to these individuals.

Boyle-Baise promotes bringing multicultural education, community-based learning, and service-learning together in a dynamic of shared control where faculty members and community partners share equal status and empower each other. This can be applied to Deaf studies with a goal of enhancing students’ awareness of social justice and its impact on Deaf people, signed language, and society.

Service-Learning in Deaf-Related Fields

Deaf studies students will ultimately pursue careers in disciplines such as teaching, counseling, social work, rehabilitation, and research, requiring knowledge of signed language and deaf-related topics (Cooper, Emanuel, & Cripps, 2012). Careers in any of these fields require the ability to integrate knowledge of the experiences of Deaf people with the ability to explain this to those unfamiliar with the cultural aspects of the Deaf community. Professionals and future professionals in any discipline working with the Deaf community not only provide services to the consumers they serve, but also educate their family, friends, employers, and colleagues about the unique needs of the Deaf community.

The notion of service-learning applied to the interdisciplinary field of Deaf studies has been discussed (Cripps & Cooper, 2012). Service-learning with Deaf people has been implemented in several academic disciplines within and parallel to Deaf studies. Disciplines within the scope of Deaf studies, such as rehabilitation services for Deaf people, have identified value in using service-learning (e.g., Hansmann, Saladin, & Quintero, 2011). Suzanne Reading and Robert Padgett (2011) discuss service-learning as an opportunity for working professionals to learn ASL from deaf signers. The field of sign language interpreting has also used service-learning in curricula to enhance preparation for interpreters working with deaf and deafblind people (Shaw & Jolley, 2007; Shaw & Roberson, 2009).

Why Service-Learning in Deaf Studies?

Service-learning in Deaf studies provides unique benefits to students. One is the enhancement of signed language skills through personal interactions with Deaf people, achieved by exposing students to Deaf people in the community (attending socials at the Deaf church), allowing them to develop relationships that facilitate meaningful conversations assisting deaf individuals in reading documents written in “legalese,” and encouraging improvement in signed-language skills (ongoing feedback from the community members). Service-learning also develops students’ intercultural sensitivity and competence. This allows students to develop an interactive and trusting relationship with individual members of the community and dispel myths, negative perceptions, and inaccurate stereotypes (Dunlop & Webster, 2009) about signed languages and Deaf people while enabling them to enhance their communication skills. The ideology that society perceives that spoken language is superior or has power is manifest in the concept of “audism” (Cripps & Supalla, 2012), the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears (Bauman, 2004, p. 242). In short, service-learning has the opportunity to combat audism by “[denaturalizing] ideologies that have become naturalized” (Fairclough, 1995, as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 81).

Another benefit for students is that students apply cultural concepts learned in the classroom to their on-site experiences and subsequently engage in personal and in-depth reflections about Deaf people. Additionally, service-learning incorporates signed language and deaf-related educational objectives with meaningful service to the community, including a dual focus on academic learning and authentic volunteer projects (Kraft, 1996). These projects, based on academic learning from the classroom, strengthen students’ thinking skills in developing empathy, personal ethics, and the habit of advocating for and within the community. Finally, service-learning can assist students in transitioning to the roles of service-provider and advocate through hands-on experience (Cooper et al., 2013). These student-oriented benefits, as well as benefits to employers and the Deaf community, can be provided through the delivery of a comprehensive and well-executed service-learning course.

Social Services in the Deaf Community

A service-learning approach to teaching about social services in the Deaf community was implemented in the undergraduate Deaf studies Program at Towson University
in Maryland. The course Social Services in the Deaf Community utilizes a pedagogical classroom setting with 20 to 45 students, varying by semester. The academic component of this course includes lectures and activities introducing a variety of social welfare issues, followed by the opportunity to apply these concepts off-campus at a variety of nonprofit and government agencies. For six years, students have been placed in these agencies and experience working directly with Deaf people.

This course is regularly revised to improve its quality. Areas such as placements and sites are reviewed every semester for effectiveness and efficiency. Placement models using one 15-hour experience and two 10-hour placements have been tried. In the single placement model, students were placed in social service, government, and nonprofit agencies to provide or establish services to benefit Deaf people. In the two-placement model, students provided volunteer social welfare-type services to Deaf people in the community during the first half of the semester. Placements were determined in partnership with agency needs. During the second half of the semester, students were assigned to agencies where they were required to assess the level of "signed language/deaf-friendliness" of one agency, provide training to staff in these areas, and assess the training’s effectiveness. This two-placement model allowed students to learn about (1) various needs within the Deaf community, (2) service-delivery systems for provision of services to Deaf people, and (3) the awareness education needed by agencies serving Deaf people.

No textbooks could be found that integrated information regarding provision of social services to the Deaf community. A variety of techniques were tried, beginning with the use of a general textbook on social welfare issues (Zastrow, 2008) supplemented with instructor lectures on the impact of these issues on the Deaf community. Another approach was using a teacher-made packet of articles laying the foundations for each social welfare issue and providing readings showing the impact on the Deaf community. Finally, a more "green" approach was taken by posting links to required readings on an electronic bulletin board.

Meeting the Challenges of Service-Learning

Issues specific to service-learning in the field of Deaf studies became apparent with the evolution of this course (Cripps & Cooper, 2012). The authors address four challenges as outlined by Keith Morton (1996), suggest a fifth one, and further provide recommendations to address these challenges associated with service-learning pedagogy. They are

1. Increased need for institutional support,
2. Significant time required to learn new pedagogy,
3. Increased logistical complexity of incorporating partners into the teaching process,
4. Anxiety associated with less control over curriculum, and
5. Student anxiety.

Obtaining Institutional Support

The faculty member teaching this class participated in a year-long faculty development program, which assisted faculty with incorporating service-learning into courses. This program provided resources for faculty new to service-learning. These supports allowed for maintaining a high level of faculty motivation to ensure the success of service-learning experiences. Grant money was available from the university to support service-learning. The faculty member wrote a grant to pay for bus transportation for class visits to a variety of social service agencies, to develop an awareness of what services were available and what services were missing for Deaf people in the community. The faculty support program also provided a standardized instrument to measure change in attitudes based on service-learning experiences and assistance with data entry and analysis. All of these resources supported the university's emphasis on civic engagement as part of its larger mission.

Learning a New Pedagogy

Revising a course from didactic teaching to service-learning requires an investment of faculty time for planning and logistics. Through all stages of the conceptualization and implementation, the faculty member must balance the learning and service objectives, integrating the goal of developing students' critical thinking skills into the curriculum (Morton, 1996). The initial development of materials required a significant investment of time, but tasks were made easier by adapting templates and borrowing thought questions for student journals from existing materials on service-learning. As mentioned previously, the faculty member created a set of readings, which included relevant and seminal articles as required student readings.

Increased Logistical Complexity

During the first semester of service-learning, significant time was spent on creating and matching students with many placements around the region. In subsequent semesters, the faculty member worked with one agency to identify individuals and families with social service needs. Using one agency to match students with local Deaf consumers significantly reduced the amount of time needed to arrange the logistical complexity of this course and decreased demands from many community partners needing guidance.
Anxiety Associated With Less Faculty Control Over Curriculum

Curricular challenges included creating a rubric for reflective journals focusing on growth and reflection and predicting and attempting to allay student concerns about a new format of pedagogy. Because much of the actual learning in service-learning takes place outside of the classroom, faculty members often feel a loss of control of student learning. Rubrics were developed to provide guidance for students and to measure student progress. When students were placed with many different organizations, the faculty member could not check up on each site regularly. The revised course design utilizing one coordinating organization eased administrative needs and reduced faculty stress. A sense of trust was accomplished through regular meetings, emails, and phone calls. With the freedom for students to falsify paperwork by fabricating journal entries or adjusting time sheets, the faculty member must carefully review paperwork for peculiarities indicative of falsification, stay in regular contact with the community partners, and take punitive measures if needed.

Student Anxiety

Although not discussed by Morton, the authors identified another challenge to be met, that of student anxieties. Students entering this course in its first semester were unprepared for the need to schedule time and transportation for off-campus responsibilities, and there was no student pipeline of information to prepare students psychologically. To alleviate this, the faculty member provided the following:

1. Provision of descriptions of the off-campus requirements in the syllabus and course catalog;
2. Student-to-student meetings (group and individual) to describe the service-learning experience in the semester prior to the course;
3. Presentation to the class early in the semester regarding the format of service-learning;
4. Posting of assignments, rubrics, and sample journals on the course's website; and
5. Meetings with students to provide emotional support for their anxieties about working in the Deaf community.

Over the years, the student pipeline of information has prepared the students for what to expect. While not totally eliminating anxiety and challenges, the mechanisms just discussed have greatly reduced both faculty and student anxiety.

Reciprocity in Service-Learning

Jody Cripps and Sheryl Cooper (2012) described how service-learning partnership involves several individuals and organizations working together toward common goals. University representatives (including faculty, administration, and students), rehabilitation agencies, and members of the Deaf community must all be committed to the success of the program and be willing to work together. The faculty member begins by contacting community partners to identify appropriate placements while students provide input to the faculty member regarding their time and geographical preferences. After the placements are made, the faculty member meets with the students in class weekly to check on progress and to discuss reflections. The faculty member coordinates all paperwork. The faculty member contacts the community partner regularly to keep abreast of any issues regarding any aspect of the experience.

Community partners work closely with the faculty member to design experiences that will be beneficial to the agency, the consumers, and the students. Partners identify consumer needs, communicate these needs to the students, provide guidance and supervision to the students, and report back to the faculty member regarding progress and any concerns that might arise. Additionally, community partners check in regularly with the consumers to ensure that the service-learning experiences are going well for them.

Deaf consumers receive explanations from the community partner about the service-learning project and then receive services from the students. In most situations, as relationships develop, the consumers begin to provide informal feedback to the students on their signed language communication skills and cultural appropriateness. Finally, the students play a central role in this reciprocal learning process. They are learners and teachers, interacting with all constituencies. Students learn and receive guidance from faculty members and community partners, simultaneously giving to the Deaf community and receiving back from them. This student-centered model provides benefits for all involved.

Research on Service-Learning in Deaf Studies

A study was conducted to ascertain the impact of service-learning on the development of altruism among college Deaf studies students (Cooper et al., 2013). Altruism has been defined as helping with a self-based locus of normative motivation (Schwartz & Howard, 1982), motivated by internal personal norms and generated by one's own internal values, rather than helping, which is motivated by external social norms. Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (1999) identified two categories of altruism: charity and change, which represent very different perspectives. Charity emphasizes character-building and a kind of compensatory justice where those who have help those who do not have. However, altruism can also aim for social change
and development of civic responsibility, emphasizing the mutual responsibility and interdependence of rights and responsibilities, focusing on enlightened self-interest, connecting students to the community in a way that creates a shared sense of purpose in working toward social justice (Marullo & Edwards, 2000).

The methodology for this study was a survey questionnaire administered to a group of Deaf studies students before and after their service-learning experiences. The goal was to determine if there were changes in the students' attitudes toward service-learning as a result of the actual experience. Significant change was noted in students' responses to 20 of the 46 statements.

The responses were categorized according to eight stages identified by Ann Harris Shiarella, Anne McCarthy, and Mary Tucker (2000) that outline the development of altruism. Findings indicated that overall, the service-learning experience had significant impact on the attitudes of the students in both charitable and social justice areas (Cooper et al., 2013). Through this process, students showed an increased sensitivity to social welfare issues and the need to respond to them. Students acknowledged that they have the ability to make the world a better place and that their actions can make a difference in the world and in the lives of others.

While the study by Sheryl Cooper, Jody Cripps, and Joel Reisman (2013) provides an optimistic picture of the benefits of service-learning within deaf-related disciplines, more resources are needed. A textbook addressing the social welfare needs of the Deaf community is desperately needed. Additional research would support the preliminary claims of the effectiveness of service-learning in the Deaf community. Studies similar to that by Cooper et al. need to be done (1) utilizing populations on other campuses; (2) using a longitudinal approach; (3) using other validated instruments; (4) examining different aspects of benefits of service-learning for students, including the impact of the experience on student attitudes toward community service and experiential learning; (5) investigating the impact of service-learning on all of the constituencies involved; (6) investigating the impact of service-learning on consumer attitudes toward receiving services; and (7) investigating community agencies' attitudes toward receiving training on signed language and Deaf awareness. Additionally, Cripps and Cooper (2012) identified the need for further investigation involving reciprocity with the community-at-large as part of civic engagement.

**Conclusion**

Overall, service-learning appears to be a good fit with the field of Deaf studies based on the curricula and research implemented thus far. Service-learning in Deaf studies allows the university to partner with community agencies as part of a civic engagement model that benefits students and the Deaf community. Service-learning can engage students in the community in several beneficial ways. Students have the opportunity to build relationships and become aware of community resources, bolstering their skills and confidence. This nontraditional approach to learning is a reality-based pedagogy, including engaging in meaningful community work and field visits, and providing a change from typical classroom settings. It can poignantly help students apply their knowledge in the areas of signed language and Deaf studies. Incorporating relationships with off-campus organizations provides both the immediate benefits of the service-learning experience, as well as future networking opportunities for graduates. Service-learning can differentiate future job-seekers from others in terms of their preservice experiences.

It appears that service-learning is a promising tool for sharing Deaf- and signed-language-awareness between the university and the Deaf community. Some suggestions for addressing the challenges of this pedagogy and course implementation in Deaf studies have been proposed. As implemented, this model has deepened relationships with community partners and given students meaningful and multicultural opportunities. Incorporation of the suggestions provided in this chapter regarding service-learning in Deaf studies can provide the missing link between students’ classroom learning and true understanding of signed language used by Deaf people and diverse issues faced by Deaf people. The potential impact of this type of learning can be far-reaching. By including a curricular component where Deaf studies students provide training to the community-at-large, widespread awareness of and sensitivity to Deaf people who use signed language can be significantly increased. Preliminary lessons learned from service-learning in Deaf studies experiences provide the foundation for ongoing curricular revisions that can take the concept forward in new directions.

Achievement of the mission of institutions of higher education and academia regarding civic engagement can occur through the reciprocity and experiences of service-learning. The involvement of dedicated partners in the community, proactive faculty members with institutional support, and motivated students can create mutually beneficial experiences. Academic programs in Deaf studies should consider maximizing community resources and offering their services to their local, national, and global community to improve the quality of life for Deaf people while attaining institutional goals of civic engagement.

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References and Further Readings


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Appendix A

Abridged Syllabus for Social Service in the Deaf Community

Social Services in the Deaf Community

Catalog Description:

Examines a variety of agencies and service delivery systems providing support to the Deaf community. Off-campus experiences required (service-learning, field trips).

Course Outcomes: The learning outcomes for this course are as follows:

Upon completion of the course, the student will be able to

1. Discuss a variety of social welfare issues, utilize critical thinking skills to identify the impact of these issues on people who are Deaf and hard of hearing, and begin to suggest solutions;
2. Describe a variety of government, private, and nonprofit organizations and agencies providing services to the Deaf community, identify which services are provided by which agencies, and be able to make appropriate referrals;

3. Describe the history of service provision to individuals who are Deaf and hard of hearing in the United States and in the state;

4. Understand the structure and procedures of various social services agencies;

5. Provide services that are helpful and meaningful to members of the Deaf community to which the student is assigned;

6. Provide Deaf Awareness training and support that is helpful to agencies in the community.

Course Bibliography

Section 1: Social Welfare


Section 2: Social Work Roles


Section 3: Poverty


Section 4: Healthcare


Section 5: Family


Section 6: Mental Health Issues


Section 7: Drug and Alcohol Addiction


Section 8: Crime and Juvenile Delinquency


Section 9: The Workplace

Section 10: Sexual Orientation

Section 11: Racism

Section 12: Aging

Section 13: Literacy

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