

Students, Agencies, and Faculty Sign on for Academic Service Learning: A Natural Partnership for Teacher Education

By Marian J. McKenna

Introduction

Academic service learning, the combining of academic learning with an identified community need, is gaining attention as a way to enhance student learning and break down remaining town and gown barriers. (Ward, 1996.) In order to sustain academic service learning as a powerful avenue for educational reform, we need to be consistent in our language and united in our understanding of what it is. We need to know what academic service learning is and is not, and what the benefits and pitfalls of using this pedagogy may be for teacher education.

All over the country, academic service learning programs are being developed, evaluated, and expanded into diverse pedagogical areas. (Erickson & Anderson, 1997). As a result of this increasing use of

Marian J. McKenna is an associate professor of literacy studies in the School of Education, The University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. The research reported in this article has been supported in part by a grant from the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.

academic service learning, information is needed for practitioners and partners to effectively provide it for their constituents. This article focuses on the results of a two-year study of academic service learning programs and what this research has revealed to be necessary components of a successful program, particularly with pre-service education students. Student and agency partner voices are heard and integrated with the current literature on service learning to describe a working model that is particularly important in teacher preparation. When a service learning model is incorporated into a teacher education program, the students gain valuable interaction with the community in which they hope to teach, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of theory and practice.

In its broadest sense, the goal of using the pedagogy of academic service learning (hereby known as ASL) is to have a more integrated and thoughtful society in which to live. More specifically, ASL seeks the integration of schools and communities, of business and education, of teachers and parents, of learning and applying. In short, the goal is for authentic integration of life and learning. In order to do this, our students and preservice teachers must get out of the classroom and into the communities in such a way that they become familiar with the realities of current community issues and have a structure in which to discuss these realities. In this way, our novice teachers begin to develop the pedagogical and communication skills necessary to become problem solvers for the future.

This study looks at a model of using ASL as a pedagogy in an undergraduate literacy teacher preparation class. Students perform literacy services to agencies in the local community, reflect on these experiences in a variety of ways, and demonstrate their ability to use ASL as a pedagogy in their future classes. Further, ways to support our current teachers in using ASL with their K-12 students are explored.

Methods

The methodology for this study was based on the qualitative research paradigm. Data were gathered via structured interviews from sixty students across a northwest university campus, representing various areas of study. The student interviewees included science, business, fine arts, and education students. The majority of the students were in their senior year of college. Students represented a nonrandom sampling, based on a campus-wide invitation to participate in the study. Students were not required to take part in the interviews but were requested to do so and were able to schedule them at their convenience. In addition, twenty-five community agencies and local school personnel who have had ASL students in their buildings were interviewed upon request.

Community agencies participating in this study were quite diverse, ranging from residential nursing homes, adult learning centers, story hours for local bookstores and libraries, YMCA/YWCA, and preschools. The school personnel who were interviewed represented elementary, middle, and high school level

administrators, teachers, and support staff. All of the interviews from the students and community partners averaged an hour in length and were taped and transcribed. Content analysis was conducted on the transcriptions of the interviews with the technical support of Ethnograph Software. Four readers read the entire set of transcriptions independently and checked reliability of the analyses. Readers, one of whom was the co-researcher in this project, were well versed in service learning and ethnographic research. Analysis of the data revealed emerging themes from both the student point of view and the community partners. The findings have an impact on the use of ASL for faculty and agency participants.

Impact of Service Learning on Students

Data analysis revealed the emergence of five major categories under the issue of the impact of ASL on students. These categories were identified as follows: academic achievement, specification of career goals, awareness of self in society, awareness of diverse populations, and the development of a social ethic. In many cases, categories overlap. In addition, there are sub-categories under each heading. We operationalized the meaning of each of these categories and used quotations from the interviews with students to highlight each category.

Academic Achievement

To define academic achievement, the researchers were not looking so much at grade-point averages or achievement as measured by criterion-referenced exams. Rather, we were looking for evidence that the ASL in which the student was engaged did in fact support that student in bridging the gap between classroom theory and practical applications. Did the ASL experience facilitate bringing the classroom learning to life? As researchers and social practitioners, we recognize the difference between cognitive knowing and experiential understanding that comes with theory in practice. We looked for evidence of this phenomenon as we analyzed the student responses in their interviews. Analysis of this data pointed to a very strong body of evidence of this phenomenon.

Examples from two different students serve as illustrations of the goal of connecting theory with practice. A clear example of this is in the voice of a student doing ASL under the auspices of an environmental science class. He stated:

It is easier for me to connect to those things to actually be involved and being out there and seeing it happen. Being involved—it's the connection that you don't get in the classroom. When you talk about seven different groups in one class that all have acronyms, they don't really mean a lot to you unless you're connected and you know which role they have and which agency—what they do. It [community service] helps my understanding. (DA11)

The goal of connecting theory with practice is illuminated in the comments from a student teaching French language and culture to a group of homeschooled

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children for her academic service learning project. She made clear the connection between classroom theory and practice in these remarks:

I'm using some of the strategies that we're learning in class in my teaching of French. I use read-alouds and that really helps with pronunciation. Then by using children's lit with the nice pictures and providing the language in context, they're able to really understand. (DA15)

These examples from different students, enrolled in separate classes, made a strong case for the contention that ASL is an effective pedagogy for enhancing academic achievement by linking classroom theory and community-based practical applications.

Specification of Career Goals

It seems reasonable that field exposure to what students are studying in their classes may have the effect of confirming or disconfirming their commitment to a particular field of work and study. Some students saw ASL as nothing more than another line to add to their resume. Others, however, grew in confidence that they had indeed made the correct career choice and were able to pursue their goal with greater insight and passion.

One student chose to do her ASL by teaching songs to the Sunday school children in her parish. Her statements succinctly demonstrated the clarification of career goals that this experience provided for her:

I have had to grow a lot. I've had to learn to be creative...learn to make something that might seem a bit boring come out more exciting. It just kind of reinforces that I want to be a teacher. This is where I want to be. I want to see their eyes light up and have a little fun with something that typically is boring. (DA 14)

A dance student worked with a third grade class of 28 students, teaching them creative movement. Her career goals were not quite as explicit as the above student, but she was exposed to a new avenue or angle on her career that includes dancing.

I definitely want to do something with creative movement. I'm thinking of eventually going to dance therapy school, which is helping people, basically sort of therapy for people using...kind of like art therapy or any of those kinds of therapy using a creative medium to help people work through their problems. ...and also working with kids and seeing how they respond to it and how they just eat it up and love it. (DM20)

In classes where professors make links between the service and learning, and students are placed in meaningful settings, career goals can be clearly enhanced. A student who conducted his ASL at an adult learning facility made the following comments:

I think it's helped me realize—reinforce some of the thinking that I've learned here. One of the things I've learned in education is that elaboration is a big part of

the learning process. I think hopefully it will make me more of a sensitive teacher that way. I guess I've seen someone on the side that didn't get to finish high school and went to prison because of various problems. Hopefully it will make me more of a proactive teacher. (DA12)

Then, there were those students who saw no connection between their ASL project and either the course objectives, or their future career choices.

Service learning is something I do for my own fulfillment and to help others. It is just another component of what makes me, me. I don't think it prepares me for a career, unless of course, I was thinking about going into counseling and then perhaps it would... (DM19)

This last quote reminds us that when developing models for ASL, it is crucial that the instructor of the course make explicit connections for the students between the course, their service, and their lives. In the above student's comments, we can see that her ASL had an impact on her personally but did not make a connection with other aspects of her life. Her work then became volunteer service, rather than ASL. This distinction is very important and a key factor needing clarification in order to promote ASL as a viable pedagogy.

Awareness of Self in Society

In this third category, we found that students discovered an overwhelming sense that they were a part of a larger community and they in fact had something to offer to their community. Often college students become anesthetized to the larger community that supports and is supported by the campus. In the pursuit of an ASL project, students must identify, analyze, and seek ways to fulfill a need in their community. Thus, they become productive members of a larger culture. The students in this study, worked together with a variety of groups of people, many of which they may never have known existed. The students grew in confidence in their abilities and communication skills. It also gave them a much greater sense of the personal connection they have to the communities in which they live.

A student who performed ASL for the literacy course gives the following insights as evidence of this category:

I think everyone should do some type of community, volunteer, service learning—whatever you want to call it. You get so much in return. Some of the guys in the class were reading stories to little kids and they were just loving it! They weren't sure at first, "Oh, I'll just take this option." They thought it would be easy. As they started reading they thought, "This is so COOL." Yeah, these kids are really cool. This is awesome. Wow, I am making a difference, even if it is a small one. Just seeing the kid's face light up or a teenager's or an adult's. Teaching an adult to read who has never read before... "Wow!" (DA14)

The following comments are from a student who did his ASL under the direction of a business management course. His comments reveal the applications

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to his academic study and an increased awareness of what he has to offer his community through the educational skills he has acquired.

I can bring my "sharp bag of instruments, my bag of tools of knowledge" garnered here at the University to that organization. The neat thing about it is that with any of these organizations, be it the homeless shelter, Big Brothers/ Big Sisters, all of these folks can benefit tremendously through good management techniques and skills. From the students point of view, this makes up a tremendous opportunity in which they can give something back to the community in which they plan to work in, as well as to keep sharp those instruments we referred to earlier. (DM06).

A student who completed her ASL project for a science class by working with an elementary school class illustrates her awareness of membership in the larger community.

This experience has made me more aware. Because I have been in school here...you get lost in school and on campus and you kind of forget that there is another whole life out there...kids and parents and people who need things. It made me more aware of the community and I'm going to be a part of the community someday. (DM04)

Awareness of Diverse Populations

The fourth category to emerge as a result of this data analysis was an increased awareness by students of the similarities and differences within diverse populations that make up any community. Within our particular demographic region, there is very little racial diversity. However, diversity remains within the constructs of economy, family structure, educational level, sexual affiliation, and cultural differences. One of the major benefits for students may be that they must remove themselves from the homogenous culture of the campus and involve themselves in diverse aspects of their own community (McKenna & Ward, 1996). One student completed her service learning project for a business class by writing for a local newspaper that supports the gay/lesbian movement in this area. She said:

It's one thing to talk about things in the abstract. It's like talking about people who are gay, but you've never actually met a gay person and you're not gay and then it's another thing. I'm not saying that to make judgement calls, but just not really know what to think or to deal with that situation and it's another thing to actually be there...and to be talking to somebody and to see what their world was like a little bit. (DM08)

For a sociology class in which she was participating, the following student chose to do ASL at a homeless shelter rather than taking the other option of reading a book and doing a report on the homeless in America. Her comments reveal the effect of breaking down stereotypes and generalizations that occur through working with diverse populations.

I know that my life's been led a lot more cushioned, I guess, than these people. And I guess stereotypes that I've had about bums, I don't have anymore. "Oh, all those

bums are just lazy, they don't want to work." I realize this happens to people now rather than just thinking, "Oh they're lazy, all bums are alcoholics," things like that. I guess I see the human side of these people now rather than just seeing them as the bums on the street. (DM21)

Development of a Social Ethic

The last category of the impact of ASL on students that emerged may be the most profound aspect of this study as well as the most complex; that of the development of a social ethic. This category encompassed the notion of the students' understanding of themselves as agents of social change, as well as an expansion of their notion of what is social change. It overlaps with the category of awareness of self and what students have to offer their community. But the differences seen in this final theme are a broadening of awareness that goes beyond the student and even their own immediate community to include broader social and political awareness. Several examples are presented here to demonstrate the complexity and sub-categories that emerged. Students talked about awareness of the need for social change, awareness of what social change is, awareness of self as an agent of social change, and awareness of a personal commitment to social change.

When a student from a chemistry class was asked about his experience with a Head Start Program, he made this response:

I see a need, but when you say agent I think of somebody taking some action in that direction, and I haven't and don't see it right now. No, I really don't. I do see the need, but to be honest, I haven't made any effort to go anywhere with it. (DM09)

The following example is from a student in a business class who stated his career goal as wanting simply to make a lot of money.

After doing these things [service learning] you really feel good about it and it definitely changed my outlook on trying to help people later on in the future. As I mature, I start to look at the world as a whole instead of just myself. (DM01)

The following excerpt illustrates a student who was able to personalize the concept of social change and expand the concept to the larger community. He chose to do peer advising for his ASL project for a business class. He reported:

I'm starting to learn more and more about my family all the time. We haven't been a real communicative family. That's just starting to change now. I'm thinking, "Wow, this is different!" It's a social change for us and it's something that I like. I really didn't like all the stuff that wasn't said. All it causes is misunderstandings, too. I think, as a society, if I can communicate more then I'll really help society too. (DM02)

The following illustrates a student developing a social ethic and demonstrates an awareness of herself as an agent of social change. She said:

Well, home schooling brings up a whole other issue. Their parents have chosen to

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keep their kids at home. A lot of that is for social reasons, too. They don't like the peer influences. I realize that but I still think that the better answer is that people like that get more involved in the public schools. I think we can really improve our schools...instead of taking kids away, we should be bringing kids in and all working together. (DA15)

Summary of the Impact of ASL on Students

In reviewing the comments of students in the above pages, we see that ASL has the potential for touching the lives of students and learners in powerful ways that affect the rest of their lives and careers. What we also learned as practitioners using and promoting ASL in higher education and K-12 programs is that the *quality and relevance of the placement* of the student must be very carefully thought through and well matched. In addition, it is absolutely critical that instructors using ASL as a pedagogy, *find ways to bring it back into the classroom and weave it into course work and theory so that students have support in making those connections*. They do not always make these connections on their own and *require dialogue and reflection time in class, with peers and faculty members, to do this*. *Reflection is a critical component for effective use of academic service learning*.

Impact of Service Learning on Community Agencies and Local Schools

To date, twenty-five interviews have been conducted with local and educational agencies that received services of university ASL students. The themes that emerged from an analysis of this data were as follows: time constraints, commitment, the exchange of new ideas, enhancement of campus-community relationships, and personal attention to the needs of clients.

Time

Time on the part of agency staff and college students is always limited. Therefore, scheduling and training become an issue on the part of the staff of the agencies, especially since there is a high turnover of students. The length of the time devoted, usually one semester, by the ASL students becomes problematic when the clients receiving services become attached to the ASL student. It can be painful or disruptive for the client to have this relationship so quickly and abruptly sundered. The director of the staff at a nursing home had this to say:

They [college students] just don't have the time and then they are gone.... You know they are really excited when they begin, but like I said they become victims of the demands being made of them at school. (HNA2)

In addition to the short tenure of the academic student time spent with the clients in any given agency is the amount of time the agency personnel must invest

in training the student. Since time translates to human resources, this is a problem that must be addressed for the work of the students to be useful and effective. The director of services for students with disabilities expressed this.

Volunteers don't stay. It takes money to train them, then the resource in the volunteer is gone and we have to start over. It becomes a lack of continuity and commitment of time. Finding the money to keep training new volunteers effects the agency more by having inconsistent frames. The short-term nature of the service learning makes it a rocky road. And really demands that you have people who can constantly train and we don't have that right now. (HNA1)

The director of a family resources program used a great many service learning students in her programs. She summarized the challenges of working with the students in the various family resource centers in the local community.

A challenge can be the university schedule versus our schedule. Some students will work within the school's schedule or you have others who will take the day off, or there is a test, or they go off during spring break. Whatever. So sometimes those things don't jive. That makes it difficult. Scheduling can be difficult. Supervision sometimes can be...some students need a lot of supervision and others don't. Commitment, scheduling and supervision...those are our challenges with these students. (HNA3)

A local teacher offers these ideas to address some agency needs:

I would like to see teachers get some training on how to use the tutors. I think I would like to see some kind of tutoring supervisor come on-site and observe and support the tutor. My job is so busy that I can't do it very much. The tutors don't have any idea where to get materials. So, we end up with a stalemate and maybe wasted time. I would like to have you conduct an in-service similar to the one you did for the America Reads Project. We could use some of those ideas and implement them. Training is key. (MMS2)

Commitment

Commitment on the part of the ASL student was not always what the agency would wish. During the busy time of the year such as midterms and finals weeks, the ASL commitment gets lowered on the list of student priorities. This can be very problematic when the client is expecting or counting on their regularly scheduled meeting with the ASL student. Issues of consistency and commitment must be addressed.

The following concerns were addressed by the director of services to parents of children who receive federal reading assistance.

Some of the [university] students have a lack of understanding of the educational system. But the big problem is when they don't show up when they are expected. I might have kids sitting there waiting, or have six kids with one tutor. It seems to get worse as the year goes on. (MMS2)

Exchange of New Ideas

Agency personnel who were interviewed report that the exchange of new ideas and discussions with ASL students were very stimulating and beneficial. The following comments highlight the benefits of these discussions between agency staff and the academic service learner.

There are just the ideas that another person brings in...there are a lot of benefits that come of this. You know, just the energy... (HNA4)

Another service learning recipient was happy to report:

The university students are a resource. They bring in new ideas that are applicable and excellent for us. (HNA6)

A local principal reports:

With the university students as a resource, I feel like I can try out a lot of new programs and see how they work before I risk them with my staff. The university kids have great ideas and energy. They are very flexible and are willing to jump into a new program and give me good feedback on what is happening with it. They [service learning students] really allow me to extend the range of possibilities and programs for the kids here. (MMS9)

Enhancement of Campus-Community Relationships

Through the efforts of the ASL students and the involvement of faculty members, campus-community relationships were enhanced. The following comments helped us to know how much and what kind of communication and involvement our local agency partners would like to have in advancing service learning efforts.

A local agency program director said:

I think as much experience education students can get to prepare them for a new mind set so that when they may enter the school as a teacher someday that they will be thinking who in the community can be their partners. Most teachers were not brought into the program with any thought that anybody else in the community should be in the schools or might be helping them with that whole thing of educating students. You know coordination is very important and so I think folks who are at my level need to be in on that coordination. So that we are not all tripping over one another and confusing the poor students who are just trying to help us out. I would like more communication. (HNA3)

Another local agency staff member voiced her interest in being more of a part of the overall enactment of the program in order to provide the best experiences for the university student service learner.

I would like a clarification of...does she [faculty member] want us to do more in informing her, or would she like me to call the student in the middle of the semester

to see if they are...if things have gone well for them or poorly. Would she like me to follow through a little closer? (HNA4)

This final comment is used to illustrate the category concerning relationships:

The other thing is, and certainly maybe some classes do this, is to bring those of us, if it is appropriate, to bring some of us into the university as well. Just to bring that other viewpoint into the classroom. Sometimes I feel that we are all here in this community and the university doesn't even use us as much as they could. (HNA10)

One-to-One Attention to Needs

Finally, the strongest benefit of this work that emerged from the data was that so many clients all over the community were receiving one-on-one attention they could not have had otherwise.

The director of an adult learning center reported:

It has been a good source of young, enthusiastic tutors...it has been a good source for me. The benefit to our students is that the ones being tutored have been getting one-on-one individual attention. We retain students better who are working with a tutor. They [adult learners] get their needs answered. (HNA4)

The director of a parent program said:

Volunteers are mentors and buddies for the students, especially kids from low-income families. It gives the students a pat on the back and provides bonding and nurturing which promotes self-esteem. (MMS2)

A local principal had this to say about some of the results he has seen in his building:

[The college students] are another person for our students to hook up with and always be there for them. We have noticed increases in students' abilities in reading, language, and math.

Another nursing home director was pleased to be able to provide more individualized services for the residents of the facility. She reported:

Students provide one-on-one interactions with the residents. They [residents] are able to reminisce, talk about their history, work on projects such as arts and crafts, write letters and converse and walk. They just get needed attention. (HNA5)

Summary of the Impact of ASL on Community Agencies

Through this data analysis it became evident that some of the greatest challenges for agencies using ASL students can also be the greatest benefits. When the university students were well trained, appropriately placed, and responsible, they had an extremely positive impact on the recipients of services. However, when any one or all of these characteristics are not in place, the service learner can create more work for the agencies than the services they provide may be worth. The message is clear: students need to be appropriately placed, well trained, and

responsible. Equally clear, but perhaps more surprising, was the level to which community partners wanted to be involved in the process of ASL when their agency was the recipient of services. They want to be involved. They want to provide the best experience for the students and for their clients. Resoundingly, they want more communication, education, and input for and about service learning. The following recommendations and considerations for further study have emerged after the first two years of this study.

Recommendations and Considerations for Further Study

Faculty

Recommendations for faculty members who want to work effectively with the pedagogy of ASL fall into three major areas of consideration. The first of these is in the area of student placements. This seems to be a crucial issue for the effectiveness of the service learning experience for all parties concerned. *The placement for the university student must be relevant to course objectives, and require a talent, skill, or knowledge base the student can provide.* An important difference between ASL and volunteerism is that connection between classroom theory and practical application. If the students can see this connection in the relevancy of their placements, the experience will be more beneficial and powerful for them and the agencies they serve.

Following this is the importance of the faculty member making every effort to continually weave the service learning experience into the course objectives. It cannot be a separate objective, for then it becomes an accessory. It must be clarified and woven throughout the objectives and throughout the length of the course. Opportunities to bring the service learning work back into the classroom and applied to the theoretical aspects of the discipline is crucial in supporting students in making the connection for themselves.

Finally, and most important, there must be authentic opportunities and avenues for reflection. Students need time for reflection with their peers. They need a structured way to respond to the experiences they are having, either through written reflection or dialogue. There needs to be the opportunity for reflection concerning the use of academic service learning for faculty members. These reflections should be of an individual as well as collegial nature. Faculty members may be their own best support systems when working out the challenges and rewards of this dynamic pedagogy. Community agency recipients of service learning need avenues for reflection and expression among themselves and between and among all other stakeholders. Only through careful reflection that is both formal and informal can the real power of academic service learning be developed. When we allow for and plan for these reflections we will develop genuine partnerships based on collaboration and communication.

Agencies

Recommendations for what needs to be provided to agency recipients of ASL also fall into three areas for consideration. *Agency partners would be better served if they had a clear idea of the academic requirements placed on the student for their service learning.* They want to provide the students with the most positive and effective experience in their agency as possible. Some agency partners have requested the use of more formalized contractual documents that alert all parties of duties and responsibilities that are expected. This may serve to provide the student with more accountability as well as clarify for the agency what the university is expecting of students engaged in service learning. In line with this issue is the evidence that community agency partners would like to be just that—partners. They want to have opportunities for more collaboration and communication with faculty members concerning their objectives for the students and the course objectives. This is a very authentic way to dissolve any remaining boundaries between “town and gown.” *The community agencies want to be involved on campus, with students where practical, in the understanding of the academic goals of the course and in the selection and training of the ASL students.*

The last prominent issue that must be given serious consideration is that our agency partners want support in how to best use ASL students in their agencies. They need to know what service learning is, and how it is different from volunteerism. *They have asked for support and training on-site for their staffs for training, supervising, and making the best available use of service learners.* Our community partners want to be a resource for us so that they may also have a hand in perpetuating social change and education of our (and their) students.

Conclusion

This article has presented the results of a two-year study to develop a model of ASL as an effective pedagogy for teacher education. Both the challenges and benefits of this model must be considered if we want students, agencies, and university faculty to “sign on” for the use of ASL. The challenges of using this pedagogy effectively are: finding and developing relevant community placements for work that is needed and is applicable to the academic goals of the course; supporting the commitment on the part of the students to their placement; and finding authentic reflection time for and with our students and community partners. The benefits to students using this model are increased academic achievement, clarification of career goals, awareness of diversity, and the development of a broad-based social ethic. The benefits for our community partners are the exchange of new ideas, one-to-one attention to students/clients, and the enhancement of campus-community relationships.

If ASL is to be rooted in a paradigm of social change and educational

development, we need to be cognizant of how it *impacts* the university and the local and larger communities. In order for ASL to be fully integrated in higher education, K-12 schools, and communities, the impact of it needs to be verifiable in order for it to advance the goals and missions of the institutions and communities it serves. ASL must be an organic concept that holds to the principles of best educational practices, but malleable enough to meet the objectives and needs of its constituents. The benefits of using ASL as a dynamic pedagogy accrued by all participants appear to be worth our continued efforts. This pedagogy develops a culture wherein democracy as a living, meaningful concept can be explored. It builds a culture where the classroom, campus, and community interact as learners, teachers, and mentors for the benefit of all.

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