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Implementing Service-Learning Projects for the First Time During the Pandemic: Two Instructors' Inspiration, Motivation and Goals

**REFLECTIONS
ON EXPERIENTIAL
LEARNING PORTAL
(STUDENT PORTAL)**

LESLEY SYLVAN 

ROBYN BECKER 

**Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*



ABSTRACT

While much has been written about student experiences with service-learning and factors that sustain university instructors' experiences in service-learning over time, less is understood about the contexts that prompt instructors to embark on their first experiences of incorporating service-learning into their teaching. The focus of this article is the experiences of two instructors, one tenure track faculty member and one adjunct faculty member, who incorporated service-learning projects into their classes for the first time during the 2020-2021 academic year. Both professors teach within a speech-language pathology graduate program. The timing and context of their first service-learning experiences are important because they took place during a challenging school year characterized by a reliance on virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper will describe how these instructors decided to incorporate service-learning projects into their classes, identify their goals and aspirations for these assignments, and describe how they identified and made initial contact with their community partners. This paper provides meaningful insight into two instructors' first experiences with service-learning at a unique moment in time and explores what contextual factors supported and motivated them to incorporate service-learning into their teaching.

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Service-learning is a form of experiential education through which students apply content knowledge to authentic community problems while also reflecting upon their experience. Service-learning involves students simultaneously striving to achieve objectives for the community they are serving, as well as obtaining a deeper understanding for themselves (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Through service-learning, students may gain academic and interpersonal knowledge and skills, and faculty members may view service-learning as a potential context to enhance the quality of their teaching. From an institutional perspective, service-learning is a form of civic engagement that can support the goal of cultivating meaningful relationships between academic institutions and surrounding communities. While both the benefits and challenges of service-learning for faculty have been explored in the literature (e.g., Darby & Newman, 2014), more research has focused on the impact of service-learning on students rather than on instructors (e.g., Blakey et al., 2016; Cooper, 2014). Further, there has been even less research focused specifically on the contextual factors supporting instructors' initial efforts to embed service-learning. As the community engagement movement becomes increasingly recognized and valued in academia, it is important to document these initial experiences and explore the influence of varying contextual and motivational factors to commence with this work. This is especially valuable as faculty members' first experiences may shape how they view service-learning moving forward.

Given the paucity of published research focused specifically on documenting instructors' very first experiences incorporating service-learning projects into their teaching, we seek to address this gap in the literature through this autoethnographic essay in which we critically reflect on our first experiences embedding service-learning assignments into our courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Autoethnographic narratives are a frequently used format for faculty members to share their reflections and experiences with service-learning and community engagement (Mitchell, 2016). This choice aligns with the larger idea that faculty members' writing about community engagement should extend beyond documenting the impact of particular projects to also involve faculty reflection. In anticipation of developing this reflective piece, we engaged in ongoing note-taking and memoing during our regularly-scheduled structured discussions. All of these written artifacts were relied on as the basis to develop this autoethnographic essay, which seeks to provide a rich understanding of the unique circumstances and motivations that led to our first efforts to implement service-learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INSTRUCTOR MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGING IN SERVICE-LEARNING

Research has documented that faculty members are motivated to engage with service-learning for a wide variety of reasons including those related to their institutions, their research, and their own personal motivations related to teaching and learning (Hammond, 1994). Related to their institutions, faculty may be motivated to re-establish public trust in institutions of higher education and for their universities to be viewed as relevant (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). Related to research, faculty may view service-learning as one way to more clearly define the implications of a particular body of research on policy, practice, and/or specific communities. Additionally, personal reasons may drive instructors to engage in service-learning. These may include a commitment to a particular place or people, a desire for collaboration and relationship-building, and the idea that service-learning can be a reflection of one's values (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009). Finally, in terms of teaching and learning, faculty members may choose to utilize service-learning because it is considered an example of a recognized high-impact pedagogical strategy. High impact pedagogical strategies are teaching practices that have been widely tested and are beneficial to a wide variety of students (Kuh, 2008). Research has shown that faculty recognize the positive impact of service-learning on their teaching. According to a study from Blakey et al. (2016), faculty reported that service-learning projects helped them move beyond traditional instructional delivery models and caused them to be self-reflective about what it meant to be a good instructor.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HOW INSTRUCTORS ENGAGE WITH SERVICE-LEARNING

Beyond instructors' individual and collective motivations, research has identified a variety of contextual factors that can contribute to or inhibit faculty members' commitment to engaging in service-learning. Institutional support and the opportunity to collaborate with other faculty interested in community engagement projects are essential (Cooper, 2014). Identified challenges include the time commitment to implement this pedagogy and varying logistical obstacles for this type of work (Doberneck, 2016). It is also understood that the contexts which sustain and inhibit instructors' involvement in service-learning may depend on where they are positioned within their institutions. Adjunct faculty, pre-tenure faculty, and tenured faculty may face different pressures and have different needs. Matthews and Wilder (2018) looked closely at the experiences of non-tenure track faculty members and found that this group may potentially

have a strong motivation to engage with service-learning given that they are able to focus more on teaching over scholarship. However, this study also revealed that these instructors may feel isolated and frustrated by the lack of recognition for their work. In contrast, research has found that tenure track and tenured faculty face challenges in how to frame their work related to service-learning in a scholarly context and that the pressures they face related to tenure and promotion may not consistently create a context supportive to service-learning (Doberneck, 2016).

Given the timing of writing, it remains to be seen how the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath will influence the contexts of service-learning in higher education. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic forced universities to operate differently in how they delivered education to students, with a broad reliance on virtual instruction and prompted higher education more generally to reflect on their responsibilities related to inequities and disparities in the wider community (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). During the 2020–21 school year, several universities found ways to implement service-learning to benefit both their students and the communities in the midst of a year largely characterized by remote instruction to help thwart the spread of COVID-19. For example, faculty from the Johns Hopkins School of Nursing developed a service-learning project through which students provided phone-based support to older adults in an effort to reduce social isolation and improve health equity (Gresh et al., 2020). Speech-language pathology students at Iona College pivoted in-person service-learning activities into virtual activities such as virtual fundraising, managing social media, and developing programming like Zoom trivia for community partners (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020).

REFLECTIONS ON FIRST EXPERIENCES WITH SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE PANDEMIC

DR. SYLVAN'S STORY

Context

I am a tenure track professor at a major state university in the Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSND) department and my scholarly interests center on the intersection between the field of education and the field of speech-language pathology. I had never taught online prior to the emergency pivot to distance learning in the spring of 2020 and wanted to be reflective and thoughtful as I planned my fall 2020 semester. Based on my experiences teaching in the spring of 2020, I was concerned about how to plan meaningful and engaging courses for graduate students who were already struggling to engage in all virtual environments. As a faculty member, I was also concerned about preparing my students to address the educational inequities in the K-12 population that are being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Szulevicz, 2021) and was motivated

to make my class on school-aged language disorders as relevant and meaningful as possible. In addition, on a more personal level, the ongoing national concerns about the impact of spring 2020 school closures on children's development and achievement felt especially poignant to me as a parent of two school-age children attending the local school district in the same location as my university. Through PTA meetings and discussions with other parents in the community, I had a close look at how school closures were impacting students both academically and socially. My position in the community as a tenure track faculty member, a mother of two school-aged children, and my experiences working as a speech-language pathologist (SLP) in public schools were all factors that influenced my thinking and planning as I incorporated a service-learning project focused on school-age children into my teaching in the 2020-2021 school year.

Background With Service-Learning

With respect to my service-learning background, I participated in the two-year community-engaged teaching and learning fellowship program at my university. In this program, I learned about service-learning pedagogy and connected with others interested in this type of work. While the purpose of this program was to support faculty in implementing community-engaged work, I had not yet had the opportunity to implement a community-engaged learning project. I had planned another service-learning project, involving SLP graduate students working in prevention-oriented literacy work at an underserved early childhood center, but challenges related to logistics and programmatic barriers had thwarted my efforts at implementation.

Goals and Motivations

As I worked to design my class on language disorders in school-aged children for the fall of 2020, the fact that this semester was so unlike previous ones for both higher education and most K-12 students was inescapable for me. While I had taught the school-aged language disorders class three times a year for three years, as I planned my fall 2020 class, it just did not feel right to proceed with "business as usual" in terms of the content and assignments of the course, especially since the focus was on school-aged children. In the fall of 2020, only 47% of U.S. school districts provided fully in-person instruction. Further, 52% of K-12 students continued to learn remotely either fully remote or in a hybrid model (Gross et al., 2020). At that time, while the exact impact of these school closures was unclear, there was a broad agreement that the most vulnerable populations of students (e.g., students with disabilities, English language learners, K-12 students from historically disadvantaged racial and cultural backgrounds) were being the most negatively impacted by the COVID-19

pandemic (Hoffman, 2020). As a mother to two young children as well as a professor, it was important to me to have my students grapple with the impact of school closures, reflect on causes of deepening educational inequities, and identify their role in ameliorating these challenges as future school-based SLPs.

Forging Initial Plans

Aligned with best practices in service-learning (Veyvoda & Van Cleave, 2020), discussions with a community organization located in the same town as the graduate program about how to support their mission formed the basis for developing the assignment. Given the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized that my desire to have my students engage in direct services with school-aged children had its challenges. Having a child in public school, I received an email blast from the school district regarding a local non-profit organization offering free tutoring. Upon further investigation, I discovered that this organization provides free tutoring services to K-12 students whose families have low and moderate incomes. The stated mission of this non-profit was helping public school students at risk for school failure.

I reached out to this community organization to see if they would be interested in partnering with me. Through a series of calls during the summer of 2020, I shared my teaching goals with the community organization and learned more about their mission. As part of our conversations, I discovered that this organization was in the ongoing process of transitioning all their tutoring sessions (which typically take place in person) into a virtual environment and determined that the best use of my graduate students' expertise would be to supplement the community organization's current tutoring program. We decided that each student in my graduate class on school-aged language disorders would spend ten hours throughout the semester tutoring a student at risk for school failure via Zoom. My vision was that my students would discuss their tutoring experiences and reflect on how their service impacted their thoughts about the unique role of SLPs in supporting communities, especially students living in vulnerable conditions. While the focus of this paper is on my motivations and goals, it is worthwhile to mention that it was clear to me that this service-learning assignment positively impacted students' ability to grasp course content. Many students often brought up their experiences with service-learning as they engaged in class discussions over the course of the semester. A more detailed explanation of the impact of this assignment on student learning can be found in a separate paper (Sylvan, 2022).

Based on my understanding that positionality is integral to the process of qualitative research and the reflection process (Holmes, 2020), it is important to identify my position with respect to the families and children who received services from the non-profit I

partnered with for this service-learning project. I recognize that my views may be shaped by aspects of identity such as geographical location, ethnicity, race, social class, status, and (dis)abilities. The ethnicities and races of the K-12 students who received tutoring from my students are unknown to me as I did not observe my students' tutoring sessions nor ask my students or the community organization to share this information, so it is difficult for me to say how such differences may have impacted my perspective. While I do live and have children in the same geographic location as this organization, I recognize that I do not identify with the target population of this non-profit as I neither identify as low-income nor as a parent of a child at risk for school failure.

DR. BECKER'S STORY

Context

I have been an adjunct professor in the CSND department at a major state university since 2016. I am primarily a school-based SLP who has been in the field for over 25 years. For the past 16 years, I have worked in schools with children who have a wide variety of speech and language disorders. I also have a clinical doctorate degree in speech-language pathology (SLPD). I was asked to teach the graduate-level class Language Disorders in Adults in the spring 2021 semester for the first time. This course primarily focused on aphasia, which is an acquired language disorder, often due to stroke. Although I work full time with school-aged children in public schools, I maintained my skills with adults by working simultaneously in rehabilitation settings over the years.

Background With Service-Learning

While I have not had any formal training or experience with service-learning, I was intrigued by hearing the stories that Dr. Sylvan shared with me about what she had learned through her fall 2020 semester teaching experience. Dr. Sylvan and I first connected when she came to observe me teaching in the spring of 2019. We realized we both had common interests in school-aged children, public schools, speech-language pathology, and teaching. We collaborated on writing a paper together and frequently spoke to discuss new research ideas and teaching approaches. As an adjunct who teaches in the evenings, I had little opportunity to connect with tenure track faculty who teach during the day. Dr. Sylvan's mentorship was a welcome addition to my professional growth.

Goals and Motivations

As I began to curate content to design the syllabus for the adult language class, I discovered that the primary media platform used to learn about language disorders in adults for this course historically was hard copy tapes that were available only at the CSND on-site computer lab. Given that the semester was virtual and remote, I would have no access to the clinic labs. In

addition, I had recently been reading about how there was a renewed call to action to transform the focus of graduate programs in speech-language pathology from traditional assessment methods to competency-based learning (McAllister et al., 2011). I began to brainstorm how to have students interact with the course content in a different way and recalled that Dr. Sylvan had used a virtual service-learning experience in her Language Disorders in School-Aged Children class in the fall 2020 semester. I wondered if I could craft a similar project for my class. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people with aphasia were particularly vulnerable to the effects of isolation from staying in their homes. This was not only because they may have medical conditions requiring them to minimize their exposure but also due to the fact that environments that promote social engagement and interaction are key to recovery for people with aphasia (Kong, 2021). After talking it through with Dr. Sylvan, it seemed that the online environment could create new opportunities for authentic real-time interaction with people who were experiencing the challenges and successes I planned to cover in my class.

Forging Initial Plans

Because I am a graduate of a clinical doctorate program in speech-language pathology, I was fortunate to have access to a network of professionals. One of the colleagues in my doctoral cohort had just launched a remote online meeting space for people with aphasia called Virtual Connections in collaboration with Lingraphica. Virtual Connections runs sessions about a variety of topics every day that are facilitated by speech-language pathologists using the Life Participation Approach to Aphasia (Lingraphica, n.d.). I reached out to her to see if she would be interested in a possible collaboration with me in the context of a service-learning project. Through a series of discussions about my class goals and the current needs of Virtual Connections, we decided that my service-learning project would involve students attending an orientation, observing two sessions, and facilitating two sessions of their own (as a group). We would spend time during class not only linking their observations about the language disorders they observed in the participants to the course content but also aligning our class discussions to therapeutic strategies they might be able to use when planning their own sessions. Our discussions also included reflection on the challenges faced by people with aphasia during the COVID-19 pandemic. I felt that the service-learning assignment positively impacted student learning by not only providing direct skill practice working with people with aphasia but also giving them the opportunity for reflection on ways to promote social relationships using meaningful activities during a unique moment in time. While I have a professional background working with individuals with aphasia, I do not identify as a person with a disability myself.

DISCUSSION

This study looked closely at the context, motivations, and initial foray into service-learning from two instructors as we made our first efforts to embed service-learning into our teaching during the pandemic. By analyzing both the contexts and motivations for our initial experiences with service-learning, several important themes emerged.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT SERVICE-LEARNING

Our relationships within our institution, our communities, and one another provided a crucial context and inspiration for our first foray into service-learning (Hammond, 1994; O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009). It is notable that the relationships we had with our institution varied based on our situations within the university. As a full-time tenure track faculty member, one of us (Dr. Sylvan) benefitted from a meaningful relationship with the community engagement office developed through participation in a fellowship program. The other (Dr. Becker) did not have any formal relationships with the community engagement office, but this lack of relationship, which could have been supportive, was offset by her strong relationship with Dr. Sylvan. The fact that Dr. Sylvan was able to share ideas, insights, and experiences with Dr. Becker shows the powerful "pay it forward" effect fellowship programs focused on community engagement can have, not just impacting the faculty who participate in these programs but also the faculty that former fellows interact with during and after such programs. It also underscores the importance of connections between faculty, which result in supportive relationships and conversations that lead to adaptations in teaching (Matthews & Wilder, 2018; Sam et al., 2021).

Both local and personal connections, as well as professional and disciplinary connections, were a cornerstone and jumping-off point for us. Dr. Sylvan identified a community partner through an email received as a public school parent in the local area, and Dr. Becker was able to draw on connections developed through her doctoral program. These situations show the importance of relationships in identifying community partners that are supportive of collaborating with faculty members to design and implement service-learning projects (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

VIRTUAL LEARNING CREATES BOTH PEDAGOGICAL AND CONTENT-RELATED MOTIVATIONS

The fact that we were forced to rely on virtual learning as a teaching modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic provided a powerful context that led to unique motivations for engaging in service-learning, both from a pedagogical and content perspective. Research

shows that a major motivation for faculty members to participate in service-learning is that it is a high-impact pedagogical strategy known to make learning active and meaningful (Kuh, 2008). The opportunity to engage with the community while directly applying class content to a ‘real world’ setting has been shown to help students make meaningful connections and support learning of course material. We were both concerned about student motivation with virtual learning, and this pushed us to implement a novel pedagogical strategy. From a content perspective, both school-age children and adults with acquired language disorders were populations facing particular and urgent challenges related to isolation in the pandemic (Kong, 2021; Szulevicz, 2021). Our desire to address these time-specific challenges was a key part of our motivation related to service-learning.

VIRTUAL LEARNING ELIMINATED SOME LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES AND ALLOWED FOR NEW OPPORTUNITIES

The context of virtual learning in a pandemic, while introducing new challenges, also lowered the barrier for us to implement service-learning in our courses because it eliminated some logistical barriers that might have existed in a different context. For several years, Dr. Sylvan had desired for her class to involve some real-world and hands-on interaction with school-aged children, but logistical barriers like time, transportation, and supervision stood in the way of making those plans a reality, especially since the graduate students in the program had busy and complex schedules. The fact that the partner community organization was offering free tutoring to students via Zoom created an opportunity where some of these logistics were eliminated. When Dr. Becker discovered the tapes that students usually used to observe clients with aphasia were only available on campus, she faced a logistical challenge in implementing the class in the “old” way. When she found a way for students to connect with an online network of adults with aphasia who needed support, it solved the problem of students needing to come to campus and created a new opportunity that had not existed before for students to interact with adults with aphasia directly.

CONCLUSION


There is a considerable amount of published research on the impact of community engagement projects on students’ learning, but less on the contextual factors that support and motivate faculty to initially incorporate service-learning into their teaching. This autoethnographic essay seeks to fill that gap in the literature by documenting reflections on our very first experiences embedding service-learning assignments into our courses while we were teaching through the


height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite our different positions within our institutions and communities, we leveraged our own professional relationship to foster both our commitment to our students and the community that they will one day serve to create meaningful service-learning experiences in our classes. Moving forward, we feel that our first experiences with service-learning have motivated us to continue including these projects in our graduate classes. As the world begins to shift back to in-person experiences, we look forward to reflecting on how we can pivot our future service-learning opportunities to align with the needs of both our students and the communities we all serve. Experiencing service-learning for the first time during an ongoing pandemic has made us more open-minded to virtual options, and we saw that both in-person and online projects are beneficial when working with communities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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