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To cite this article: Johan Prinsloo (2015) Service learning in custodial settings in South Africa, Journal of Psychology in Africa, 25:2, 151-155

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2015.1021532>



Published online: 13 May 2015.



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BRIEF REPORT

Service learning in custodial settings in South Africa

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This study describes the findings of a community engaged service learning program in which nine female and three male students ranging between 22 and 31 years of age from a large South African university participated in a study conducted in two metropolitan areas of South Africa. They were all senior level students registered for Criminological Evaluation and Assessment, a practically-oriented module aimed at equipping students with the required knowledge and skills to conduct criminological assessments. The students voluntarily assisted correctional centres with the assessment of sentenced offenders and in the compilation of individualized Correctional Sentence Plans (CSP) to inform the rehabilitation process of offenders. Students reported their reflections on their service learning experiences using on-line interviews and with question prompts. Extracts from the thematic data analysis suggest students perceived themselves to be instrumental to the Department of Correctional Services in the fulfilment of its goals, while they benefitted from enhanced learning and social responsibility.

Keywords: corrections, experiential learning, higher education, service learning, student motives and experiences

Introduction

According to the South African White Paper on Corrections (Department of Correctional Services, 2005), the development of a new corrections-focused correctional system for South Africa must take into account the significant contribution and support needed from external partners. It therefore needs to pay special attention to developing, maintaining and promoting partnerships with role players within the Integrated Justice System. Some of the Community Participation Policy guidelines included in the White Paper on Corrections (Department of Correctional Services, 2005) are:

- the creation of opportunities for the establishment and maintenance of partnerships between the Department of Correctional Services and the community
- the formalization of collaborative partnerships and networking relationships with the community
- the integration and coordination of services rendered to offenders
- ensuring the effective re-integration of offenders into the community

This article presents findings on a service learning program with university students which may facilitate the attainment of these goals.

Service learning

Service learning is a “form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” and of which reflection and reciprocity are key components (Amtmann, Evans & Powers 2002, p. 23; Cooper, 2014, p. 416).

Applied to higher education, service learning is about community engagement, civic engagement, or community-based learning (Lieberman, 2014). Cooper (2014, p.

416) considers service learning “a powerful pedagogy” as well as a philosophy and program type, enhancing student learning and their sense of social responsibility. It is different from volunteer community service in that it is tied to a regular course of study objectives to enhance their attainment (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). Service learning benefits the students in the in-depth learning of course content combined with relevant field experiences. Students benefit from service learning in the form of increased motivation, enhanced civic responsibility and citizenship, enhanced personal and social skills as well as leadership capacity. “Students are actively participating in the process of understanding, integrating, and applying knowledge” (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015, p. 52).

Community partners are assisted in the fulfilment of their missions and goals based on their functions and activities (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). Furthermore, a curriculum innovation dimension also emerges in the form of student feedback to the academic department and the alignment of curricula to societal needs (Montesinos, Carot, Martinez, & Mora, 2008). Of significance to the South African context is the fact that students with service learning become agents of and for community development (Montesinos et al., 2008).

A vital element of progressive service learning in the form of community-engaged partnerships is that it allows for a process of reflection by students on their experiences. As we enter into community-engaged partnerships, above all, it is essential that we listen to students, hearing and understanding their cares and concerns while respecting and reinforcing pride for their diversity, home communities, and life experiences (Lieberman, 2014). Lieberman (2014) suggests the use of e-portfolios and autobiographical essays which allow students to reflect on their community-based service learning experiences.

It is Lieberman's (2014) submission that strategic place-based partnerships between universities and communities offer educational experiences to students as contributing citizens and create opportunities for a positive and reciprocal impact. Learning communities with shared experiences, integrated and experiential learning, community engagement and the reflective practice and the implementation of theory become integral elements of students' experiences (Greeff, 2011; Lieberman, 2014; Wenger, 2006).

The corrections place-based partnership

The specific program is for senior (honours) criminology students registered for a fourth year module entitled "Criminological Evaluation and Assessment". The module is practically-oriented and its objective is to equip students with comprehensive and systematic knowledge and skills necessary to conduct criminological assessments, evaluations and profiling, and to write comprehensive scientific reports to facilitate the management of both offenders and victims in the criminal justice system.

Students render services to assist correctional centres with the assessment and profiling of sentenced offenders and, thereafter, with the compilation of a Correctional Sentence Plan (CSP) which will indicate which rehabilitation programs are suitable for each specific offender. All assessments done by students take place under the supervision of an internal supervisor. From their service learning role, students actively participate in the process of understanding, integrating and applying criminological knowledge to conduct criminological assessments, evaluations and profiling. They also learn to write comprehensive scientific reports to facilitate the individualized management of offenders. The students' practical exposure may lead to a "closing of the gap" between caring professions and improve the quality of service available to the Department of Correctional Services (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, 2011).

Goal of the study

The goal of this study is to reflect on the experiences of the students involved in service learning in correctional centres. The author sought to explore student's motivations for engaging in service learning in corrections. The following research questions guided this study:-

- What factors initially motivated participants' involvement in the project?
- What were their experiences within the operational domain of the correctional environment?
- What were the students' personal experiences based on their participation in the project?
- In what ways did the Department of Correctional Service benefit from the project?

The findings from the study are aimed at advancing the understanding of service learning as pedagogy in a corrections context (Bachman & Schutt, 2014; De Vos, et al., 2011).

Method

Research design

The research questions were explored through a qualitative research enquiry. According to Bryman, (2012, p.

70) qualitative inquiry answers questions on experiences which "epitomize a broader significant experience base". Qualitative inquiry is appropriate where the goal is to explore, describe, monitor and investigate individuals' attitudes, motives and behaviours interpretively (Francis 2011).

Participants

A total of 12 postgraduate students elected to take the service learning experience Criminological Evaluation and Assessment module option (females = 9, Blacks = 3, age range 21 to 33 years). They provided a service to four correctional centres in large metropolitan areas of South Africa.

Data collection and procedure

Permission for the field experience study was granted by both the University as well as the Department of Correctional Services. Students responded to open-ended questions on their motivations and experiences with service learning within the correctional environment at the conclusion of their placement. Participants were asked to provide answers that were as detailed as possible to make a meaningful contribution to the research data. They submitted their responses by e-mail interview which also provided additional opportunities for further questions from the interviewee and the interviewer, as well as follow-up online probes.

Data analysis

The data were thematically analyzed by categorizing according to the themes provided by the research questions. It was then scrutinized in terms of its usefulness in relation to the research questions. Further analysis was carried out by selecting already existing texts in a thematic category and integrating these with groups of relevant quotations from the results in order to achieve saturation of the data. Hammersley (Bryman, 2012) stated that the plausibility and credibility of an analysis of empirical data are important criteria to validate research findings. Extracts from the thematic data were studied again to systematically identify various descriptive and comparative units of text that would allow for interpretations in terms of the research questions, which were then reported.

Findings and discussion

Findings suggest a richer understanding among the students of aspects of correctional rehabilitation and the reciprocal benefits for them and corrections services. Students reported benefitting from experiential learning and the experience enhanced their level of motivation, citizenship, and social responsiveness. Through service learning, the objectives included in the Community Participation Policy guidelines in the White Paper on Corrections (Department of Correctional Services, 2005) were achieved.

Students' initial expectations of service learning

When asked about their initial expectations regarding their practical involvement in the corrections placement project, nearly 85% of the students perceived service learning "as a form of experiential education in which students engage

in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (Cooper, 2014). It emerged that participants were eager to make a social difference:

many people are complaining about crime and no-one is doing anything to solve it. (P1)

and to make a difference in the backlog [in assessments]. (P4)

They perceived it to be an ideal opportunity to gain insight, to understand the interaction between theory and practice and to apply their knowledge; to implement theories, to reach their potential in the field of criminology and to assist the already overburdened correctional system. Participant P3 explained it as follows:

I was very excited to participate in the project as I was certain it would provide me more in depth insight into the field of criminology and how the knowledge I have gathered practically applies to the world.

Exposure to the correctional milieu

The world of corrections can be a daunting one. An initial concern was how the “psychological structure” thereof would affect participants’ experiences. All participants confirmed their nervous anticipation in this regard, as indicated by participant P12:

At first, the environment was scary.

The participants explained that their regular exposure to the correctional environment helped them to come to terms with it:

...the more you go into the prison, the more you get used to it. (P7)

The data however, clearly illustrates participants concerns about their own safety.

There have been times that myself and the other girl I do assessments with have been left alone in the office that is just off a court yard and which is accessed by inmates. (P7)

The attitudes of the staff and inmates also do not always create a realistic impression of the risks posed by the correctional environment and may even create a false sense of security:

All the staff and even the prisoners are friendly, everyone seems to get on well. (P2)

while some participants were surprised by the informal nature of the correctional setting:

I was expecting a more formal and strict prison setting. (P4)

Conversely, some of the participants (35%) experienced the physical environments of correctional centres as disappointing and depressing. Participant P6 described it as follows;

The environment in the correctional centre is chaotic. The prison itself needs stationery as well as chairs that are not broken for people (staff and offenders) to sit on. I am at the records office and there are broken windows, broken blinds as well as chipped paint on the walls.

From a strategic point of view, participant P1 demonstrated insight into systematic and managerial problems within the Department of Correctional Services when questioning certain officials’ commitment to the goals and

functions of the institution, thereby demonstrating his own potential as a leader:

I understand that the Department of Corrections needs more funds and volunteers to help out with the extensive workload. There are many strategic plans and procedures but it proves to be impossible to implement without the relevant sources. I feel that some of the correctional officers are very relaxed and even disorganized, and that they might sometimes forget that they are working with offenders.

Nevertheless, what is of importance is the fact that inmates in correctional centres became “real” to the participants instead of generalized stereotypes:

I learned to look at the person, not the crime. (P7)

and as participant P1 explained:

Working with offenders, I realized that there is a chance for rehabilitation for some. (P1)

It is also about real life, real offenders, with real problems and issues. (P2)

Participant P5 summarized his experience as a clear example of increased motivation, enhanced civic responsibility and citizenship, as follows:

At first, I thought that offenders were not like other people, but since my involvement with DSC I can see that they are human beings who need guidance in terms of taking decisions. Secondly, I also thought that I am in this department for experience only and then leave, but now I feel like I can stay in this department as much as I can, because I am really enjoying what I’m doing.

Personal benefit

Most of the participants (85%) acknowledged that they benefitted from the project in terms of increased motivation, enhanced personal and social skills, insight into social problems and needs, as well as their participation “in the process of understanding, integrating and applying knowledge” (McDonald & Dominguez, 2015). Gains in terms of practical exposure and experience were mentioned most often.

I have really enjoyed partaking in this project thus far and for me personally it has been very rewarding. I have been studying for many years as a part-time student and having had the opportunity to be able to gain practical experience is invaluable. As I have been working for many years, I know the value in practical experience and the weight it carries in terms of establishing credibility in any profession. (P8)

Linked to practical experience gained and the value thereof, more humanistic considerations were also found.

The practical experience I am gaining from participating in the project, which I feel I could not get anywhere else, and to learn and experience the offenders as individuals themselves and not just thinking about them as criminals. (P7)

The way in which participant P12 described her experience is an illustration of insight gained into social problems and needs as well as the need for civic responsiveness:

It made the pages of my study guides and textbooks come alive! Through speaking to the offenders, the devastation of drug and alcohol abuse has become a living reality to me. The havoc that Aids has wreaked in terms of child-headed households turning to crime as a means of survival, coupled with minimal or no education, has been a real eye-opener to me. (P12)

Participant 4 believes that:

On a personal level it is helping me to understand the dire situation in the South African prisons. Overcrowding, not enough correctional staff or supporting staff, and terrible living conditions for the inmates.

Furthermore, the realization of theory in practice was also appreciated by the participants and may entail the enterprising dimension referred to by Montesinos et al. (2008) in the form of student feedback to the academic department and in aligning curricula to societal needs.

I found that offender assessments link theory to practice. I understand my theory more and find it even more interesting. It has helped me see the different aspect to the criminological study. I have seen how someone with a passion for the prison system could work there. (P7)

Participants were also confronted with practical problems. Informal problem solving became part of their experience.

The offenders can be uncooperative at times. The forms are repetitive but once information is gathered, I let them go while I complete the rest. They get bored and fidgety if left too long without communication or activity. (P9)

Value of the project to the Department of Correctional Services

Service learning involves a reciprocal benefit to both the student and to the community partner. In this instance the benefits of service learning to the Department of Correctional Services aligned with the fulfilment of its mission and goals, functions and activities. More specific benefits reported by the participants are discussed below.

Participants mostly described the formidable workload faced by the Department of Correctional Services and officials' appreciation for the relief brought by the participants:

The work load is unbelievable, and assistance is greatly appreciated. (P3)

The lack of capacity of the Department of Correctional Services made an impression on participants:

I thought that the main purpose of this project was for students to gain some practical experience by "kindly helping out" in that regard but since then, having been into the prison to do the assessments I have realized that a very real need exists within the DCS for this help. The DCS is very understaffed and have very little resources at their disposal to be able to carry out this vital function properly. (P4)

Additional value added to the Department of Correctional Services by this project includes a better quality of work, more reliable assessment reports pertaining to the risks and treatment needs of offenders that would ensure proper case management, remedial intervention through face to face training and consequently improved rehabilitation services.

The staff members that are currently doing the assessments (not all, but some and in my opinion) have not been adequately trained and the forms completed are either incorrectly completed or incomplete. In my opinion, this impact negatively on the accuracy in terms of assessing the risks and needs of the offender initially and in the long term, the impact on effective rehabilitation is affected. I found that I have to be more involved and make a greater effort to get to the prison between studying. (P9)

Implications for corrections education and services

Through the involvement of the student participants, a specific training need was identified within Correctional Services. Service learning will provide essential training benefits that can fill this void. The transfer of education and skills, from a criminological perspective, will result in better trained, more confident and competent, as well as more motivated correctional officials.

Limitations of the study

This study was limited to a small number of research participants which means that the research findings cannot be generalized to other cases or populations. However, the goal of this research is not to generalize but to explore, interpret and describe the motives and experiences of the research participants in terms of understanding service learning in a correctional context. Due to their individual differences, some participants were more reflective than others so that the more reflective students shared more on their experiences than those who were not as articulate.

Conclusion

This article reflects on the experiential learning achieved by students involved in service learning within a correctional environment. Students assisted with the management and improvement of the quality of services available to offenders and in the process gained real working knowledge on how to conduct criminological assessments and to develop Correctional Sentence Plans (CSP) which can be used as the basis of suitable rehabilitation programs for individual offenders. Through their participation, students also assisted in the fulfilment of the goals and functions of the Department of Correctional Services.

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