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Clinical Sociology in Service-Learning

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ABSTRACT

Experiences in teaching internship courses illustrate some of the advantages of teaching sociological practice through community service. For example, a course requirement to spend nine hours of each week of a semester in an advocacy group provides a richer variety of opportunities for students to learn about themselves, society, sociological theory, and research methodologies than is possible in conventional lecture-discussion classes. Furthermore, becoming participants in sociological interventions heightens students' awareness of related ethical concerns, as well as of the complexity of social problems, and of how to define viable individual and collective solutions.

Service learning is defined here as supervised community participation which enables students to deepen their experiential and theoretical understanding of themselves and society. Service-learning pedagogies include internships in varied social settings, journal reflections, selected readings, and seminar discussions. More specifically service-learning refers to college and university courses which require students to make community contributions through participating in government or non-government agencies, schools, advocacy groups, special interest organizations, etc., concomitant with completing some traditional academic assignments. From a historical perspective, service-learning in U.S. undergraduate education is a relatively recent venture. Small isolated programs began to appear in the 1960s, and more recently educational groups

have organized service-learning networks and resources which span the entire United States. For example, **Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service** is a coalition of over 470 college and university presidents who are committed to helping students develop the values and skills of civic participation through involvement in public service.

Service-Learning and Sociological Practice

Service-learning can also be thought of as a specific kind of sociological practice: a collaborative venture which aims to bring about community change through clinical sociological theories and sociological methodologies. Service-learning courses give students varied opportunities to apply sociological concepts and theories as individual and community interventions through government agencies, advocacy groups, or special interest organizations. These experiences provide in-depth learning for students, and enrich seminar discussions on substantive issues, sociological practice, and clinical sociology in ways that are not possible in more conventional courses.

One goal in teaching service-learning classes is to ground sociological theory through practice (Glaser and Strauss 1967), thus developing more reliable clinical sociological theories (Glasser and Freedman 1979). Another goal in teaching service-learning classes is to refine sociological methodologies, so that selected techniques can be applied in clinical settings. Having to accomplish specific tasks in varied social contexts creates experiences and generates data for collective review, analyses, and discussion in the classroom. Sociological theories and methodologies make these summations and interpretations possible.

Background Information

The teaching notes in this article report on nine service learning courses which the author offered at Georgetown University during a three year period, 1992-1995. All nine courses were organized along similar lines. The requirements for each student were: (i) to work nine hours in a community internship each week of a thirteen week semester; (ii) to complete limited required reading in preparation for seminar discussions; (iii) to write three short papers on internship experiences and additional individual readings; (iv) to conduct simple on-the-job research; and (v) to write a compre-

hensive reflective essay of approximately ten pages, to describe and explain the substance of internship experiences, readings, and seminar discussions. Completing this course work earned three academic credits. Students were also given an option of earning one extra credit by completing three additional internship hours each week, and by writing three or four additional pages for the reflective essay.

The nine internship seminars given over the three-year period enrolled ten to twenty students in each seminar. An interesting measure and point of comparison is that each time seventeen students participate in an internship seminar, the total number of hours worked by these students in their internships is the equivalent of one person's full-time work for a year.

The registrar's official internship seminar titles were: Community Involvement; Women and Politics; and Intercultural Learning and Teaching. These titles reflect the selected substantive interests and concerns examined through students' internship experiences. Students may repeat both the Community Involvement and Women and Politics seminars, making a total of six to eight credit hours for either Community Involvement or Women and Politics, depending on whether or not a student completes a fourth credit option for one of these courses.

The Intercultural Learning and Teaching seminar was originally part of the Washington, D.C. Higher Education Innovative Projects program, 1993. It was funded by a grant through a D.C. award from the Commission on National and Community Service. The Community Involvement seminar was first taught at Georgetown University in 1971, and has been offered sporadically since then. The Women and Politics seminar was designed for Women's Studies students, as well as for sociology majors and other undergraduates at Georgetown University in 1992. This internship seminar has become a required practicum for Women's Studies majors.

Class Sequence

As soon as students locate their internships, generally with the assistance of directories and personal guidance through the Volunteer and Public Service Center or the Career Center at Georgetown University, they begin to write analytic journals and construct ethnographies of the agencies where they are working. Abstracts from student journal entries, and short descriptions of these ethnographies are presented in class for discussion mid-way through the semester.

The internships in Community Involvement seminars are very varied, and have no thematic focus except a general goal to improve the quality of life for less privileged people. The internships in Women and Politics consist of agencies which focus on women's concerns and issues; and the internships in Intercultural Learning and Teaching include placements in schools, mentoring networks, and other educational facilities.

Required readings in all the internship seminars are discussed in terms of possibilities for social change, as well as individual and social responsibilities. These themes are used to develop sociological theoretical perspectives, and to define sociological principles for organizing clinical data and experiences. For example, social change and individual and social responsibility are viewed from structural-functional, conflict, and cultural theoretical perspectives, in order to increase students' objectivity and awareness in assessing the many different kinds of situations in which they find themselves.

Students are also required to build bibliographies about their internship interests, which become source materials for their final reflective essays. These essays synthesize the substance of internship experiences, readings, and seminar discussions.

Theoretical Base

At the outset of the semester, major sociological theories and paradigms are reviewed, and students are asked to select perspectives which they believe will usefully guide their journal analyses, observations, and interpretations while on the job. Selecting either structural functional theory or conflict theory or cultural theory (which includes symbolic interaction and interpretive sociology) is encouraged, rather than combinations of approaches. The rationale for this pedagogy is a strong belief that students have a more valuable, in-depth learning experience, and develop more of a "feel" for applying sociological theory, if they select one of the classical sociological theoretical paradigms to analyze their internship applications, rather than several. Students too easily become dilettantes when they try to apply eclectic combinations of different paradigms.

Once students choose their theoretical perspectives, they are asked to use them in seminar contributions, and eventually in their reflective essays. Having to struggle with sociological concepts, in face of practical internship challenges, is a central learning component of these service-learning courses.

Research Methods

In order to gather information about the agencies where they work as interns, students have to be able to conduct interviews, ask probe questions and record findings through participant-observation techniques. Historical methodologies also yield in-depth information for sociological analyses of the internship agencies.

Research methods are effective tools to uncover answers to questions raised in theoretical analyses and interpretations of data. For example, class discussions focus on the “fit” of theory and methods, given the everyday realities of students and clients, as well as on the theoretical implications of different research methods. In addition, ethical concerns associated with using sociological research methods are discussed.

Sociological Analyses of Findings

As students are required to use sociological theories and sociological research methods in their assessments of internship experiences, their vested interests and parochial perspectives can be broadened. Furthermore, these expanded world views increase possibilities for more objective analyses of data and experiences. The necessarily experimental service and research aspects of internships give students real-life opportunities to test the viability of sociological concepts and theories, and they are encouraged to use these tools to examine troublesome substantive issues. Questions, rather than formal research hypotheses, focus student inquiries: Is religion an influence which precipitates or impedes social change? To what extent does gender influence the life-chances of those who live in poverty? How does access to resources affect the quality of education given and received? What are the moving forces behind the establishment of goals and priorities in advocacy groups and government agencies?

When students are asked to place microsociological analyses within macrosociological perspectives, they begin to identify the broad gestalt of interpersonal issues. For example, it is insufficient to know the inner workings of a family, as families must also be viewed dynamically in contexts of racial or ethnic communities and social class settings. Students select at least three major concepts, to be applied in assignments throughout the semester, which refer to these different levels of sociological analysis. For example, self, family and social class; dyad, gender and social change; or triad, religion and culture. Ideally these con-

cepts are eventually thought of as integral components of structural functional, conflict, or cultural theoretical perspectives.

Interventions

Combining internship experiences with substantive studies in service learning classes enables students to become aware of their potentials as change agents. Their presence in social agencies is a catalyst for heightening the awareness of their clients and co-workers, thereby modifying individuals' lives and organizational effectiveness in attaining agency goals.

Interventions provide students with opportunities to examine ethical issues involved in interventions, such as assumptions made about and by the helping professions. Seminars are forums for students to outline what they think responsible interventions are, through assessing individual and social consequences of specific change strategies. At all times attention is given to interventions which promote clients' well-being, or which respond to agency and community priorities, rather than to those which merely meet students' needs.

Results

Students who participated in these service-learning courses usually gained a much firmer grasp of sociological theory and sociological research methods than students in traditional lecture courses. Internship experiences, together with sociological frames of reference, provided students with first-hand knowledge of sociological practice and clinical sociology. Students learned how to ground theory in practice, and to refine both theories and methods for more viable everyday applications.

One negative result of service-learning is that sometimes so much is happening in any given internship that it is easy for students to lose the substantive focus of a course, or to get so caught up in descriptions and associations of ideas that analyses are either difficult or impossible. When this occurs, the most constructive learning cannot take place, and students' achievements and perspectives may become truncated or less rooted in the disciplines of sociology and clinical sociology. Consequently some students may gain no more than a nodding acquaintance with sociological frameworks, rather than a lasting understanding of sociological theories and methodologies.

However, overall, the special qualities of service-learning result in students claiming that they remember and use what they learn in internship seminars more readily and more meaningfully than what they learn in traditional classroom settings. Furthermore, students frequently make decisions about graduate school and careers based on their internship experiences, sometimes reversing plans they had made before taking an internship seminar. Because students use their internship experiences to demonstrate their academic and practical accomplishments when applying for jobs, an unanticipated consequence of teaching internship seminars is many requests for letters of recommendation about students' accomplishments in service-learning and sociological practice.

Conclusions

Service-learning provides almost limitless opportunities to develop sociological practice techniques, and to refine clinical sociological theories. The discipline of sociology increases the meaningfulness and effectiveness of analyses and interventions related to both interpersonal and institutional concerns.

Clinical sociology is a valuable preparation for faculty who want to teach service-learning courses, as this new discipline examines functional and dysfunctional consequences of varied levels of social interventions. Faculty and students alike can appreciate more complexities in the influences among individuals, families, communities, social classes, social movements and society by applying concepts and research strategies of sociological practice and clinical sociology. A focus on change, and the consequences of change, is also relatively well-developed in sociological practice and clinical sociology.

Service-learning is therefore a viable context for sociological practice, as well as a means for basic research in clinical sociology. When tools of sociological practice are used in internship classes, the discipline of clinical sociology is advanced and may become a career option for students.

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