Ethical Issues and Questions for Service-Learning Faculty and Administrators in Urban Universities

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Abstract

University faculty and administrators must consider the ethical issues raised by the use of service-learning pedagogy. Structured around the usual topics that guide ethical research, this article raises questions and concerns, and gives specific examples. Given the potential for harm and the power differentials that exist in the service-learning arena, universities have an ethical responsibility to carefully consider ethical issues and to establish sufficient oversight of service-learning courses.

Although experiential education in general, and service-learning in particular, have been around for many years, little attention has been given to the ethical issues that are raised by this pedagogy. This article attempts to raise questions about the ethical conduct of service-learning so that faculty and administrators can reflect on them. According to a Campus Compact survey, twenty-eight percent of students from its member universities are engaged in service projects. This means that at any given time there are thousands of students engaged in service-learning in their communities, doing many different activities, most of the time outside of the direct supervision of the faculty.

Many educators have had difficulty in differentiating service-learning from community service, volunteerism, internships, and field placements, and all of these terms may be used interchangeably. The following definition helps to distinguish the difference: "Service-learning is a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle and Hatcher 1996). Furco (1996) offers us a model that further clarifies the range of these educational experiences. On one side of the range is community service where the emphasis is on the service and the recipient and where learning is not structured. Field placements are on the other end of the range where the emphasis is on the learning objectives of the students and where service is offered only when those activities enhance the learning needs of students. Service-learning is located in the middle, between these two poles, where reciprocity is the watchword. Ideally, the needs of the learner and the recipient are both met equally. Both teach and both learn.

The subject of ethics has been said to be "primarily concerned with the evaluation and justification of norms and standards of personal and interpersonal behaviour" (Karhausen 1987). In university settings, the ethical conduct of faculty who are engaged in research, at least with regard to human and animal subjects, is closely monitored by institutional review boards (IRBs). Indeed, over the last few years, increasingly careful guidelines have been introduced by federal gatekeepers to safeguard participants in university-sponsored research. The need for oversight by IRBs and the codes of ethics of various disciplines (such as the American Anthropological Association, the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, and the American Sociological Association) have evolved from such horrors as the Nazi medical experiments, the Jewish Chronic Disease Hospital study, and the Tuskegee syphilis study. Having absorbed these lessons, faculty carefully consider ethical issues when conducting research or overseeing student research. However, what are our ethical obligations in the service-learning arena when we are *not* conducting formal research? What norms and standards of personal and interpersonal behavior should we follow? How can we protect the well being of our students and the people they come into contact with in the service-learning arena? How can we balance the risks and benefits of a service-learning project? Should there be ethical oversight committees for service-learning projects? Do such committees already exist?

A study of the literature on ethics of service-learning produces little to guide us. Quinn, Gamble, and Denham (2001) raise some of the issues with respect to the use of community-based education for the health care and human service professions.

This article is designed to stimulate our thinking about ethical issues in the service-learning arena by raising questions using the customary ethical concerns developed to guide research. The author will provide examples based on the Lifebook Project, a grant funded service-learning project carried out by two undergraduate social work courses in partnership with a state child welfare agency.

The Lifebook Project

Students in the undergraduate Methods of Social Work Practice I classes had the choice of three different service-learning sites; the Lifebook Project was one of them. Although each site raised ethical issues and concerns, this article will focus on those that emanated from the Lifebook Project. This was a pilot project, underwritten by a grant from the Simmons Foundation, that teamed undergraduate social work students with foster children, ages eight to nineteen, to create lifebooks. A lifebook is a compilation of memorabilia that chronicles and validates a person's life—it can be part photograph album, part scrapbook, part art project, and part autobiography. A lifebook attempts to substitute for what most of us are lucky enough to have in abundance— documentation of our early lives compiled and saved lovingly by parents and other family members.

Ethical Issues

The following topics, the usual ethical concerns that researchers must take into account, will form the basis for considering the ethics of service-learning.

Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent. Service-learning students and faculty can be construed as more or less welcome intrusions into the organizations, agencies, neighborhoods, and institutions that make up the service-learning arena. We would probably agree that no one should be forced to participate and interact with us and our students, but what kinds of coercion may have been brought to bear on the organization staff, the agency clients, the institution inmates, or the neighborhood residents? Exactly who has requested and sanctioned our participation? Who in the service-learning arena has not been consulted? What are our obligations to ensure that those people are not coerced? What are our responsibilities when our students work with vulnerable populations or individuals with diminished autonomy and/or capacity? For that matter, what about rights to voluntary participation for students? Should they have any choice about their service-learning sites and activities? The right to withdraw from a project is an essential component of voluntary participation in research studies. Can participants in service-learning—students, agencies, community members—opt out of or renegotiate the terms of agreement? If so, do they know that they have that right?

It is mandatory that research subjects give informed consent. What kinds of information about the service-learning project are given to the actors in the service-learning arena and to students? What is our responsibility as faculty to ensure that all actors know about the parameters of the project—the timeline, the purpose, and the procedures? Do agency clients understand that students are providing services instead of agency staff who may have more training and experience?

Consent in research studies is often considered an all-or-nothing event. In service-learning, consent is more often the product of on-going negotiation. In the Lifebook Project, two supervisors met with the caseworkers in their unit meetings and informed them about the Lifebook Project opportunity for the foster children on their caseloads. They were asked to recommend those children who met the criteria for selection and who could benefit from the process of creating a lifebook. The caseworkers were encouraged to discuss this opportunity with their clients, both the foster children and their day-to-day caregivers, and to recommend appropriate children to the supervisors.

In theory, both caseworkers and foster children volunteered to participate, but how clear and how consistent was the information communicated by the supervisors to the caseworkers and by the caseworkers to the clients? As the semester unfolded, it became apparent that there was great variability in the understanding of the participants—caseworkers, children, and foster parents. In retrospect, a letter should have been written to the caseworkers to give them access to complete information that they could reflect on over time, along with the faculty's name, telephone number, and e-mail address in case they wanted to ask questions directly. In addition, a meeting between the caseworkers and the faculty would have offered an opportunity to gauge

their willingness to participate and to ensure that they all had consistent and accurate information.

Was there some degree of coercion? Sometimes it is difficult to refuse to participate in a project that one's supervisor is promoting. The caseworkers may have been concerned about extra work that participation might necessitate, or they might have been apprehensive about buried traumas being uncovered as the lifebooks were created. Some of the children had the project explained to them by their caseworkers and some received a call from the supervisor when the number of interested children did not meet his expectation. A phone call from a man who was not well known to the child or to the caregivers and who had a great deal of power over their lives may have felt coercive to these children. They also may not have had opportunity or encouragement to ask questions. A fact-sheet written for the foster children would have helped them to understand the purpose and potential benefits of the Lifebook Project. It could also have encouraged them to discuss the pros and cons of participation with their caseworkers. This would have given the caseworkers something tangible to go over with the children. More uniform procedures would have enabled everyone to make informed choices.

It is possible that some of these children were "volunteered" by their caseworkers because they believed that the children would benefit by being involved in making a lifebook, that it would be "in the best interests of the child." Of course, the children may have acceded to please the caseworker, or as a form of unspoken barter (I'll say yes to lifebooks so that you will let me…), or, a more troubling possibility, to ward off negative consequences for displeasing the caseworker. What was my responsibility to ensure that the children's participation was truly voluntary? For that matter, what does "truly voluntary" mean?

The students were instructed to clarify the children's understanding of the project, to offer an opportunity for them to ask questions, and to once more establish their voluntary participation. The students were also encouraged to be conscious of the nonverbal indications of lack of consent such as forgetting appointments, being late, or being inattentive. Since foster children often feel powerless to influence their social environments, students were advised to provide opportunities for choice—over such things as lifebook design, meeting time and place, direction of the work, and the need for breaks.

No Harm to Participants. Research subjects are routinely safeguarded from harm. What constitutes harm in service-learning projects? Are participants or students likely to be physically, psychologically, or socially harmed? Will they be embarrassed or made to feel uncomfortable? How could harm come to the agency or organization, the faculty, or the educational institution? Certainly if a service-learning project is not well planned and carefully constructed, any resulting bad press could damage the university's reputation. What is our responsibility as faculty to minimize or eliminate potential for harm? Since no human endeavor is free from risks, the issue becomes one of risk management and reduction, not usual concerns for faculty. Potential allies in

helping us consider the risks of participation can be found at the service-learning site as well as on campus. These people can assist in anticipating and minimizing the risks to all the participants in the service-learning arena.

What harm might have come to my students or to the foster children in the Lifebook Project? Some travel was involved and they might have been involved in an accident, although there was no more risk than that encountered in normal daily life. The supervisors of the child welfare department investigated the driving records of all the students, with their permission, in order to safeguard the children.

What about other risks? The process of reexamining their lives during the course of constructing a lifebook might reawaken old wounds and re-traumatize the children. This apprehension was discussed with the supervisors and resulted in careful screening of the children by all of the professionals who knew their social histories. Would the students' brief involvement harm children who had already experienced severe losses? Does the benefit of engaging in the process of producing a lifebook, with all its attendant issues, balance out the risks? These are decisions that need to be made by the professionals and by the children themselves. Did I have an ethical obligation to make sure that the balance was appropriately weighed?

Might the foster children pose a physical threat to the students? Might they accuse them of physical or sexual abuse? All of these are risks that social workers encounter in the course of their work with potentially volatile clients. However, the children were all screened by their caseworkers and the supervisors to ascertain that they met the criteria of low risk to others. In addition, the children's caregivers and therapists had approved of their engagement in this activity. As a way of safeguarding everyone, students were encouraged to work in teams and to meet with the children either in their foster homes or residential facilities or in public places such as libraries. The students were also given guidance about sharing personal information, e-mail addresses, and home telephone numbers.

Might the students have posed a risk to the children? As required by the foster care agency, all students agreed to criminal background checks. Prior to contact with the children, the supervisor set up guidelines for emergency contingencies so that the students would know what to do in exigent circumstances.

Capacity. Although not a usual topic in ethical discourse, the issue of capacity is nonetheless worthy of scrutiny. Capacity in this context refers to the capability of students, in terms of maturity, skill, and knowledge, to perform the tasks and duties expected by their instructor and by the other actors in the service-learning arena. What are students capable of doing? In order to answer this question it is clear that faculty must know what skills and knowledge the students possess. Faculty will inevitably have more information about their majors than about non-majors, so appropriate skill and knowledge assessment techniques need to be devised. It is patently unfair to all parties to place students in positions that they are not equipped to handle. This only leads to anger and resentment as well as feelings of shame about the failure, to say

nothing of other potential risks to all those involved. Once the faculty has a good understanding of the baseline capacity of the class, she can begin to initiate activities that build capacity—in-class exercises, lectures, discussions, and readings.

Time is another capacity-related issue. Do students have enough time to engage in service-learning? Today's college students, particularly non-traditional ones in metropolitan areas, juggle many different hats—parent, employee, caregiver, chauffer, homemaker—as well as that of student. Faculty should be realistic about the time required to engage in service-learning outside the classroom. Usually, service-learning is added to already existing classes and faculty must struggle with decisions about what content or assignments could or should be deleted or altered in order to allow students the time necessary to complete service-learning hours.

Keeping issues of capacity in mind, did my students have the capacity to join with the foster children in order to facilitate the production of some form of lifebook in the time frame of a semester? Prior to designing a service-learning project, I carefully considered what other courses the students had completed. Also, these students had been accepted into the field work portion of their education so they were well known to us. I had previously worked in the foster care system myself so I believed that I was well aware of the issues, as well as the risks, that the students would face. Since the process of engagement and relationship building, coupled with beginning interviewing skills, were the basis for the curriculum of this course, I thought that the Lifebook Project would provide a good match for both student capacity and course learning objectives. My students could do this project, provided they received sufficient support and backup from the caseworkers who knew the children and their social histories.

Oversight. Who will be providing monitoring or supervision for students at the service-learning site? Are these people properly trained or credentialed to provide this oversight? Is it faculty responsibility to scrutinize their qualifications or do we simply rely on organization staff or administration assurances about these matters? Should we ourselves bear some responsibility for supervision or monitoring?

While I did not believe that there was much potential for harm to the children or the students with all the safeguards that had been built in, I relied on assurances that the caseworkers would provide the agreed upon guidance to the students and would monitor the reactions of the children. In child welfare, the workload is overwhelming. Some caseworkers were very responsive to student contacts and requests; some never even returned their phone calls. The supervisor was informed and tried to direct the caseworkers, more or less successfully. Because of the potential problems that might have arisen, I felt ethically responsible to provide more supervision of this project than to the other projects where there was more direct supervision on site.

Exploitation. Specific codes of ethics prohibit possible exploitation of research subjects. Are we and our students exploiting the community for learning purposes when we engage in service-learning endeavors? Are we committing acts of academic imperialism (Hamnett and Porter 1983) if we write academic articles about our

experiences? The potential for students to exploit the service-learning arena for learning purposes parallels the potential for us to exploit our students. For example, when we use excerpts from the writings of our students to illustrate points in academic articles, do we get their written permission to do so?

One of the components of service-learning is reciprocity. What is fair? Is there balance between students and other actors in the service-learning arena in giving and receiving, in mutual learning and teaching? What exactly is given and what is received in the various exchanges? How do we value these things? What questions about power and powerlessness are raised? To a greater or lesser extent, the ebb and flow of giving and receiving in any relationship remains in flux. While we and our students may have an equal relationship with some actors in the service-learning arena, we may have an unequal relationship with others. If we monitor for these asymmetrical relationships, we will be more aware of the potential for exploitation.

When all is done, the very least that we can give is our thanks, but how can we demonstrate our gratitude? There are many ways to accomplish this. For example, a combination final celebration and exhibition of learning could be held honoring the joint work of the students and the partners. When doing this, it is important to consider inviting the partners at all levels of the project. Another way of giving thanks is for both the students and the faculty to write thank-you notes to all the various actors in the service-learning arena. In these notes, the students can thank the partners for being their teachers in the field. Also, certificates of appreciation can easily be created on the computer using readily available software. The most important issue is to consider what type of thanks would be meaningful to the recipients at all levels.

It is possible, of course, for the community partner to exploit the students. This can take many forms. First of all, the community partner agency might use free student labor to perform duties that had formerly been done by salaried employees or ask the students to perform duties outside the agreement with the faculty member. Agency clients might try to get students to take on the roles of housekeeper, chauffer, grocery shopper, errand runner, repair person, therapist, or money lender, even when those are not sanctioned service-learning roles.

Dangerous Knowledge. What happens if, in the course of their service-learning engagement, students become privy to confidences about suicide, violence, or criminal actions? What are our responsibilities to the agency clients who may share these secrets with students and what is our responsibility to the sponsoring agency and to the public? What if students uncover malfeasance, illegal actions, or discriminatory practices on the part of organizations? How do we prepare them for such possibilities?

Relationships. What are the ethical dimensions of the relationships that are formed by students in the service-learning arena? What are the implications of the asymmetry of these relationships? Should these relationships end when the semester is over? Under what circumstances might students continue their relationships with the agency clients or with the organization itself? Are they free to give or accept money or have sexual

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relationships with the people at their project? What are the ethical implications of academic timelines? Do all the participants understand the academic calendar? For example, is it fair to leave the arena when the semester is over? What responsibility do we bear to ensure that needed services are continued?

Toward the end of the semester, several students expressed an interest in continuing the relationships with the foster children and this was used as a springboard for discussion of the importance of a good termination. As every social worker knows, termination begins at the first contact where the limits, structure, and content of the relationship are placed on the table for discussion. As the relationship progresses, the social worker reminds clients from time to time of the expected ending date. Of course, all the preparation for termination cannot prepare students to be ready for the feelings involved. This is part of the learning that is made more real and immediate by the use of service-learning. Prior to the inclusion of service-learning, termination would have been discussed as an abstract concept. Having real relationships with real people and having to end those relationships in a constructive way was so much more valuable than a lecture.

The question of time, or at least time as the University constructs it, is problematic. Our ways of organizing ourselves by semesters and quarters does not reflect the rhythms or needs of people in real life. Faculty should, at the very least, carefully consider the impact of a short-term service-learning project on the life of the organization and its clients and constituents. Perhaps several one-semester courses might alternate the provision of services at the site. Again, a cost-benefit analysis is in order. There might be instances when students would want to become regular volunteers at the service-learning site after the semester was over. If this occurred, students should be encouraged to carefully consider their reasons for wanting to continue and the realities of their time constraints. Often, caught up in the passion of serving, students do not want to give up the good feelings that come with service; however, they cannot anticipate how differently they may feel when summer or the next semester rolls around with its attendant activities and demands.

Confidentiality and Privacy.   Faculty expect students to reflect on their service-learning experiences in the form of journals, papers, class presentations, and discussions, and we add our own viewpoints and judgments to this discourse. Are the actors in the service-learning arena aware that they are the subjects of these communications? Should they be? The tension implicit here is reminiscent of the controversy among qualitative researchers over the use of unobtrusive observation and data collection in public places. On one side of this debate is the simple truth that anyone can watch the actions of others in a public place. "A counter point is that when such observations are systematic, recorded, and analyzed, they no longer are ordinary and thereby violate rules of privacy" (Glesne and Peshkin 1992). What responsibilities do we have to ensure confidentiality? Should real names or pseudonyms be used? What about identifying data? What is the potential for harm to participants if private information is disclosed?

Dignity and Respect. Are faculty responsible for teaching communications skills or empathy along with their discipline studies? Is it ethical to assume that agencies and organizations will teach students special skills that they may need? Do we assume that students will be prompt, reliable, respectful, and treat everyone with dignity, or do we make those issues part of the preparation for interacting with community partners? Many universities attempt to expand their students' exposure to people of diverse backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, language, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and class, but what do we do to ensure that students are prepared to relate to all people in a respectful way? In our attempt to engender cultural competence, do we ensure that the students have the skills to be culturally sensitive?

Recommendations

Ethical obligations of service-learning educators to informed and voluntary consent, to risk-benefit analysis particularly when vulnerable populations are involved, to considering confidentiality and privacy whenever possible, to ensuring that all actors in the service-learning arena are treated with respect and dignity and are not exploited, parallel the obligations of researchers. In the same way that IRBs offer guidance and oversight for research, universities should institutionalize some mechanism for ensuring that there are potential benefits, as well as minimal risk, to all actors in the service-learning arena. This is a controversial recommendation. Some faculty who do research with human participants believe that IRBs already limit them in many ways. Faculty from disciplines that do not conduct research with people may be reluctant to surrender their autonomy in establishing service-learning projects. Some universities already require service-learning courses to undergo some form of scrutiny, either at the departmental or IRB level.

The following recommendations can be used to guide faculty and administrators as they consider the ethical dimensions of service-learning:

1. In order to be ethically scrupulous, faculty should carefully consider all the ethical dimensions before, during, and after they engage in service-learning in the community.

2. Each discipline should refer to its own code of ethics for guidance in conducting service-learning.

3. All actors must be fully informed about the parameters of the service-learning project. Faculty must be particularly vigilant when participants in the service-learning arena are vulnerable due to diminished autonomy or capacity, and ensure that appropriate information is also offered to legal guardians and/or caregivers who may have the best interests of the participants at heart.

4. Faculty must ensure that the students have the capacity to carry out the planned service-learning activities.

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5. All actors in the service-learning arena should know that they have the right to withdraw from or renegotiate the terms of their engagement in the project. Care should be taken to ensure that no one is coerced.

6. Faculty must carefully consider the value of, necessity for, and confidentiality about personal information regarding service-learning participants.

7. Students must be given specific guidelines to follow in the event of emergencies.

8. Appropriate monitoring and support must be available to students.

9. The research agenda of service-learning faculty must be expanded to include research on ethical issues.

10. Colleges and universities should establish some appropriate system for oversight of all service-learning courses and projects.

Conclusion

Clearly, service-learning and other types of experiential learning can serve the needs of students to learn, the needs of the community to obtain services and resources, and the needs of universities to "live" their mission statements. Since service-learning pedagogy is currently being widely used in our universities, we must be careful not to utilize it simply because it is in vogue. It should be used when it is the *most* effective way to accomplish the learning objectives of the particular course *and* when it can serve the needs of the community. Service-learning practitioners and researchers should always err on the side of caution. Faculty must perform cost-benefit analyses of the proposed work in order to minimize potential risks that may accrue through the conduct of service learning. Incorporating ethical considerations into service-learning may pose some challenges but doing so will, in providing protections to our students, to community partners, and to our universities, only strengthen the service given and the field of service-learning itself.

Ethical issues are always context-bound and this discussion is not intended to cover all potential ethical concerns. It is important to raise questions about the nuances and complexities of some troubling unexplored ethical issues that populate the landscape of service-learning and it is hoped that others will consider the questions and continue the dialogue as they examine the ethical issues embedded in their own service-learning situations.

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