

LINKING CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY: THE ELLIOTT SCHOOL PROJECT

Carol L. Langer, Ph.D., University of Nebraska at Omaha

This narrative describes a service learning component of a course in macro social work methods at the undergraduate level. Although I have been teaching for 16 years and have always tried to involve students in experiential learning, I took a leap of faith and asked the students to design, develop, implement, and evaluate an after-school study club at the most diverse elementary school in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Social work educators frequently struggle with techniques to bring the printed page to life. Some courses make this task easier, but a course in macro social work methods does not lend itself easily to bridging classroom and community experience. The core knowledge, values, and skill bases of macro methods are accessible through observation, i.e., visiting a legislative hearing, attending a school board meeting, or working with a program director about budgeting issues. As an educator who continually seeks new ways to provide maximum opportunity for community involvement for baccalaureate students, I developed a program for heightened, ongoing community involvement, and the excerpt that follows demonstrates that program.

The social work program at Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, Nebraska, is a small program with approximately 30-35 majors. The typical class size is 12-15 students. Since Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska, the program has access to the state legislature, many state boards, the state penitentiary, and other state level institutions. While visiting these agencies and programs certainly has its benefits, my goal is to find ways for students to experience firsthand such things as chairing a meeting, planning a program, developing a budget, networking. An equally important concern for me is to increase the opportunity for students to experience diverse clientele. Lincoln is not a city with great di-

versity. It is present, but one must intentionally develop ways to make the contacts happen.

The macro methods course comes at the end of our practice sequence, so a setting that accommodates individual, family, group, and agency interaction is ideal. The school that has the greatest amount of diversity in Lincoln is Elliott Elementary School. It is what would be called an inner-city school if Lincoln had such a thing. Elliott is approximately 86% nonwhite, has a great number of single-parent families, and has high rates of familial poverty. In addition, 26 different languages or dialects are spoken at this school. Elliott has developed many ways of working with its diverse population, such as its clothing store. If a student comes to school without mittens, the clothing store will find a pair that fits. Obviously, however, there is much to be done in an area with so many needs. A school-community partnership is critical to the development of positive relationships between school and home, school and child, and parent(s) and child.

A retired colleague mentioned to me that Elliott might be a wonderful site for our social work students. He had discovered this opportunity through a conversation with an assistant principal at Elliott. With the agreement to participate from the 13 students in my macro class, called Community Organization, Planning, and Administration, I decided to

design the course around an actual project that would allow total student involvement and minimal interference from me as instructor. I have had a career commitment to experiential learning, but in the past have fully developed projects and activities. Thus, the only unknown prior to this experience was the way in which the activity or project would unfold. In this case, I took a leap of faith and asked students to do everything that I typically would have done in the past. I honestly don't know exactly why this idea took on such meaning for me, but it seemed to be a natural fit between my needs for academic content, the students' learning needs, and the school's needs. This format helped me to accomplish the goals of the course but also required some different pedagogical skills from me.

My role changed from hands-on designer and developer to consultant. A critical piece of this role change was the development of positive relationships between Nebraska Wesleyan University and the entire community left primarily to the students in my class. I needed to encourage a sense of professionalism about this activity from the outset. Further, I lost control of the activity in the sense that it was no longer "mine," but the project was now "ours." This change alone meant that I had to think quickly and use every ounce of education and experience in design and development that I possessed. Had I not had experience, I think the entire project would have been nearly impossible to achieve.

The text (Brueggemann, 2002) and workbook (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001) used for the course provided a supportive framework for experiential learning. The first few weeks of the course consisted of defining the place of macro methods in social work, understanding planned change, linking the code of ethics to macro practice, and interfacing micro and group skills with macro practice. In addition, understanding generalist macro practice was emphasized. At that point, the class began a discourse regarding the nature of the project

they were to develop. The macro students decided to invite an administrator from the school to speak to the class about the school and what needs were perceived at least from an administrative perspective.

An assistant principal visited the class the following week, discussed current programs, e.g., the YMCA, 4-H, Boy and Girl Scouts, and suggested the idea of a before- or after-school study club. She indicated that many students did not have their homework completed for a variety of entirely understandable reasons: their parents did not speak English and could not help; their parents worked during the evening shifts and they had either sitters or older siblings who did not emphasize homework completion; some were too tired or hungry or cold to do their work. Due to the school-breakfast program, many students arrived early, so she felt that a before-school program might work better and wouldn't conflict with the after-school programs. She welcomed our participation and offered full cooperation and assistance in any way possible.

After the principal's visit, the students discussed the merits of before- and after-school programs. They certainly had not had a study club in mind—they were thinking along the lines of entertainment, games, and popcorn! Neither the times nor days suggested for a before-school study club fit the schedules for the students in my course, so it became clear that class time would be used once weekly to carry out the study club at Elliott. Needless to say, this was an unexpected development for me. I suddenly had to figure out how to fit the necessary academic elements into the time allowed. Ironically, the project itself allowed this to happen. Examples will be given later.

I divided the project into four stages. The first was planning, the second was development, the third was implementation, and the final was evaluation. I required a three to five page paper for each stage. A summary of the activities of each stage follows.



The Planning Stage

The fifteen students in the macro methods class began planning by brainstorming. From this process, a general framework of the after-school study club began to emerge. In order to evaluate the project, the students developed a mission statement: "The Community Organization, Planning, and Administration class at Nebraska Wesleyan University (joint program with Union College) will facilitate the transition of Elliott Elementary School's 5th and 6th graders to junior high by providing an after-school study club to encourage good study habits. Goals include developing positive relationships between students and adults, helping students develop good study habits, and creating an ongoing partnership with Elliott School." Role responsibilities and time frames for accomplishment were negotiated. My responsibilities at this point were to point out the need for parental permission slips and to plan a visit to the school to discuss the program with the various elementary teachers. As part of this instructional process, I developed an in-class activity that emphasized writing goals and objectives, which allowed analysis of the link between goals and objectives and evaluation.

Students were assigned or volunteered to do such tasks as contacting area grocery stores for donations to be used as snacks, writing the parental permission slip, organizing the visit to the school (the student from my class who did this eventually became the necessary liaison once the students learned that one person needed to be the primary contact), and seeking activities or games that could be used to interact with the elementary students when their homework was completed. The planning stage took two weeks. I have to say that I was fairly nervous during this stage. I watched as students struggled to find snacks, worried about experiencing such great diversity, and feared "failing" to accomplish our goals.



The Development Stage

This stage of the after-school study club project is the "nuts and bolts" of the undertaking. Elliott Elementary School is part of the Lincoln Community Learning Center project. Benjamin Zink, a liaison representative from the YMCA, is the director of the Elliott Center. The student for the macro methods class and Mr. Zink were in constant communication. Expectations for student behavior (both Elliott Elementary and macro methods), school procedures in case of emergency, dismissal regulations, and other such detailed guidelines were transmitted to the macro methods class. Attendance registration was required both for the elementary students and for the macro methods students. Due to the large number of potential students in the after-school study club and the small number of social work students to work with them, only 5th and 6th graders were targeted for participation. Letters requiring parental signatures were given to all students in those classes. Students were not allowed to participate unless they returned a signed letter. There was a potential of 120 students who might come to the first session, but Mr. Zink assured us that so many were involved in other activities that we might expect only 15 or so. The program was designed, rules were in place, and roles and responsibilities were distributed.

The Implementation Stage

The macro methods students arrived at Elliott expecting 15 students. Although not quite that many participated, the students reported that they had a good first session. Part of the following class period was used to troubleshoot issues. Several things emerged. First, there was a no-snack-in-the-room-rule which had not been discussed. Second, the

elementary students had to leave the building first, then return for the study club. Role boundaries were also discussed. One macro student overheard a conversation between a student and teacher that concerned her, and she didn't know where to go with her feelings. Also, several macro students were overheard making statements to the elementary students that were clearly insensitive. An example was a conversation about how cold it was outside and that the macro student was glad he/she didn't have to walk home in this weather. The elementary student, of course, *did* have to walk quite a distance to get home. A student came to my office and privately divulged this information. I remember thinking that I needed to address this in class but certainly didn't want to alienate either the student who told me or the student who displayed insensitivity. I had time to think about it before the next class which was time much needed. I decided to teach by example.

I told the macro social work students a personal story of my own insensitivity that reinforced one of my most important "educator messages"—assume nothing. I was working in a weight loss center during the summer and talking with a potential client. This potential client wore ragged jeans and a stained t-shirt. The weight loss program required a prepayment of hundreds of dollars, which I assumed this person would be unable to afford. Well, this person was very wealthy and plunked down the entire cost of the program. I segued from this story into the need to remember that our lives have been different from many other people with whom we will work. We always need to be aware of what we are saying and how we are saying it. The student who had told me privately of the insensitive conversation actually disclosed to her classmate her concerns about what had been said. The offending classmate acknowledged the concern and a raised consciousness of diversity regarding more than race or ethnicity. While it was difficult to address these

issues in methods class, I forced them throughout the semester to monitor their own progress. This monitoring process became part of the content for the required paper for each phase.

At one point, the situation was really tense between the person who had emerged as the study club-methods class liaison, one ally, and other students in the methods class who were not perceived as doing their fair share of the interaction and work. I left the room until the social work students resolved their difficulties. I received an e-mail that had been sent to all macro students after that class session. The e-mail not only summarized the meeting, but also demonstrated the need for open communication. This open communication continued throughout the rest of the semester. In fact, macro students were able to address each other directly with their concerns and observations. Conflict management and resolution were not planned according to the syllabus, but actually experiencing and acquiring the skills was an unexpected gain. Even the quietest student in the macro class was involved in this process.

Hearing the students begin to discuss their observations about the elementary students and their progress convinced me that both sets of students were benefiting from this effort. The social work students had taken ownership of their project and had enormous pride in their activities. The snacks were donated; in fact, donations exceeded the need for the semester and were saved for the second semester. One organization in Lincoln gifted each elementary school after-study club student with a game and a CD at holiday break. The macro methods students wrote thank-you letters to all the organizations involved in providing snacks. The implementation stage lasted only six weeks, but the carryover effects were enormous, as the evaluation phase demonstrated.

The Evaluation Stage

As one student wrote, "We began our evaluation procedures when we set up our mission statement, goals, and objectives." The evaluation stage consisted of asking members of the macro class, elementary classroom teachers, and elementary students who participated in the study club to complete questionnaires. The first goal was to develop positive relationships between students and young adults. When asked what they liked best, the elementary students said "talking to the helpers," "the student helpers," and "the people who helped me with my homework." All responded that "yes" they liked the people with whom they worked. A teacher who was away on maternity leave for most of the program heard about it from her students and spoke highly of the positive relationships she saw.



The second goal was to help students develop good study habits. All elementary students responded that the study club had helped them with their homework. The teacher who had been away on maternity leave noticed an increase in homework completion.

The third goal was to create a partnership between Nebraska Wesleyan University and Elliott School. This was accomplished, and plans were made to continue the program during an introduction to social work class the second semester.

The macro methods students were administered an additional survey designed to assess their opinions of the program's success and their own level of learning during the project. Five students felt that the program was fairly successful, and seven felt that the program was successful. No one felt that the program was unsuccessful. When asked what

they gained from this experience, some macro methods students referred to learning about programs and planning, implementing and evaluating, while others targeted teamwork, appreciating diversity, and being able to help someone. Some of the responses follow:

- The importance of working together and pulling our own weight.
- An appreciation for the leaders and organizers "behind the scenes" to keep the program running.
- Deeper look into these children's lives and what it is like growing up for them—totally different than my own childhood.
- That in a short period of time, a great relationship can be formed.
- Commitment.
- It made me realize more kids need a program like this in their school.
- I gained the understanding that not everyone feels responsible for a program that we developed.

One student wrote in her evaluation phase paper:

I really enjoyed being a part of this program. I will be honest. I thought that this was going to be easy when you first suggested this idea at the beginning of the semester. I never realized that it was going to take up so much time and effort. I also never realized that it was going to be so difficult to make this a class project. I assumed that everyone would be "pulling their own weight," but that was a wrong assumption on my part. That did cause the process to be a little frustrating at times, but I have learned more that way. In the real world, things like this are going to happen all the time, and I feel that I will be better prepared for it when it does. Thank you for giving me this experience.

After the formal surveys were conducted and summarized, the macro methods students addressed issues that were important for the second-semester class to consider. We had a brainstorming session where we identified concerns and did a cost-benefit analysis of the options generated. The first concern identified was that there was not enough time to work with the students if snacks were a continued part of the plan. All students felt that snacks needed to be included. Many options were addressed, but a consensus led to the proposal to talk to Mr. Zink about two options: allowing the study club participants to be released from their regular class a little early, and extending the time the study club met by 15 minutes. Two people volunteered to talk to Mr. Zink about these options.

The second concern was that the students who participated in the study club were those who tended to be conscientious about their homework. The macro students were concerned that we weren't reaching the population we had targeted. The options discussed were to talk to teachers to get referrals for students with greater needs or to enclose invitations with the "need for improvement slips" ("downslips") that teachers send to elementary students and their parents.

We invited Mr. Zink to class to discuss our concerns with him. Ironically, he informed us that the students who came to our study club participated in no other after-school socialization programs. We appeared to be serving a very important function for these students since they had little opportunity to increase their social skills. Meeting for 15 minutes longer was a workable option, so plans were made to extend the meeting time for second semester.

Summary and Conclusions

Service learning can be a powerful experience. In this particular case, even though there were some difficulties along the way, I would have to say that the experience was

meaningful in ways that cannot easily be measured. I believe that the students gained carryover skills that will serve them well in the real world. There are some issues that any instructor of such a course must address, however. First, for this particular class it was important that the planning be part of their experience. This part of the process was probably the most difficult. Making certain there is a shared vision is critical. I am not certain that I was entirely successful at accomplishing this, but I do think it was beginning to happen. Planning can be done in advance for a smoother project, but for these students, I required ground-up designing, development, and planning

Because this first class of social work students had so much invested in the after-school project, they were reluctant to hand their "baby" over to another class. In fact, several students volunteered to be the consultants for the project the second semester. This was an important link that provided continuity.

Second, it required great flexibility on my part. I had to be willing to give up class time but I also had to make sure that the students were using the material we would have covered. I did that by asking for examples from the project to fit the readings. I also had to be more of a facilitator than an instructor. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) was the model I attempted to emulate. If one subscribes to his ideology, one works with the oppressed to hear their oppression and builds pedagogy from that basis. One engages in a dialogue with the oppressed so that change, action, and education emerge from that dialogue instead of from the top down as in traditional classrooms. I believe we succeeded in two ways by adopting Freire's model. First, we engaged the community with which we hoped to interact in a dialogue of discovery, aimed at determining needs and finding ways of meeting those needs. Second, by using the ongoing project as the

framework for course content, learning needs of the students in macro methods class emerged as the project unfolded. This model greatly increased the social work students' responsibility for their own education.

Third, evaluation of the students became more difficult. I was purposefully absent from their sessions at the study club. I depended on them to take attendance. I required a paper for each major section of the project that included both scholarly support and personal evaluation. However, I believe that next time I will require journaling in order to gain more process information. There were distinct times during this process when finger pointing occurred, hostilities and misgivings emerged, and blaming was present. Yes, we dealt with these things openly in class, but I discovered when I read the papers that there was much left unsaid. Both those who were blaming and those blamed would have benefited from a vehicle to vent their feelings in a confidential manner. I believe that journals could also have been a useful personal tool of evaluating self-growth across the duration of the semester. If students had the chance to read the entire journal from beginning to end, they could have had a snapshot of their personal journey and of their journey toward professionalism, too. In order to evaluate these journals, I would have required a scholarly response to some piece of information from the course content and how it applied to the study club experience, as well as their process information.

Finally, I saw growth, personal and intellectual, occurring among the macro social work students from week to week. This is probably the single greatest observation I made from my advantageous position. Individuals who rarely spoke now addressed concerns openly. Persons who tended to dominate now listened. I think that I learned as a professor, too. I had been teaching for 16 years, but to me, every class is a journey taken by both students and instructor. I learned that I had to listen carefully to what was be-

ing said, to how it was being said, and to what was obviously absent from conversations. I had to think fast sometimes. When one chooses this sort of pedagogy, one is always leaving oneself open. I never knew where the content for the day might actually take us. I never knew from week to week what might emerge from the on-site interactions at Elliott School. I assumed that if there were any problems, I'd be notified. I discovered that this was probably true on an institutional basis, but it was not true for the macro students. They didn't really "tattle" on each other, but they needed little encouragement to air their concerns when no games were planned, or when someone was absent and an elementary student was then disappointed. The macro students walked around for a week with these issues which then erupted in the classroom!

Coalitions developed as a result of the time between class and study group. This time lag allowed people to get together and talk about each other and each other's performances. I liken this to making stew; it's not particularly ready to eat when the ingredients are first put together, but let it simmer for awhile and voila! This time lag and the resulting "stewing" of thoughts and feelings could be avoided, I think, through the use of journaling. I would also like to find a way to know in advance of class what the issues for the week might be. This might avoid the feeling of walking a tightrope I developed as the semester progressed.

As previously mentioned, I took the responsibility for formal communication between institutions, but the majority of deep and lasting experiences happened on site. One example that will stay with me forever is of a little boy who was exceedingly shy and alone at the start of the study club. Every week showed a huge change in this little boy, and he looked forward to the one-on-one attention he received. By the end of the semester, this little boy was laughing and interacting with

other students his age. I wish I would have been there to see this too, but hearing the macro students describe this event was equally fulfilling for me. The tears in the eyes of the person telling the story were enough to convince me that social work was being done.

The study club was conducted second semester by a class of undergraduates who thought they might be interested in social work as a career. While not a part of this paper, the study club was equally valued in their experience. While I no longer teach at Nebraska Wesleyan, I believe the study club continues in my absence. This is a marker of success.

References

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