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Service Learning: Deepening Students' Commitment to Serve

by LINDA S. JOHANSON

THE

first year I took a group of nursing students to Mexico to study, I reasoned that they would emerge from the experience with enhanced cultural sensitivity. That was, in fact, one objective for this nursing elective. However, as I analyzed the journal entries students wrote while abroad, I realized it was the opportunity for service that had the greatest impact.

Students wrote that volunteering their nursing services to the Mayan people in the Yucatan region of Mexico had changed them. All the students in this first group and the three cohorts to follow commented that seeing this level of need and sensing their ability to make a difference would have an impact on the way they practiced nursing. Their general perception was that they would be more empathic professionals and continue to volunteer and serve when they became registered nurses.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVICE

Serving others is an important Christian principle. Jesus taught that "whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 20:26, NASB), and that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28, NASB).

Jesus is the epitome of a servant. For example, John 13 illustrates the dramatic account of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. His humility encourages his followers likewise to adopt an attitude of service.

The notion of service is important to the nursing profession. When candidates are interviewed for admission to our nursing program and asked why they chose nursing, most reply with an altruistic motive such as the desire to

help others. Because service involves benefiting others or contributing to their welfare, nursing is considered a service-oriented profession. But as our profession becomes more complex, with higher client acuity and more demanding technology, are students still learning this necessary service component?

We are quick to update university laboratories with the latest simulation models and curricula with the most current information on drugs and pathologies. But have we been equally as diligent to nurture a desire for service in students? The concept of service can easily be disregarded or buried unless we intentionally integrate service-learning into the nursing curriculum. What is "service-learning,"

and how can it be emphasized in a curriculum already packed with mandates and tradition?

SERVICE-LEARNING

In the United States, the concept of service-learning generally has gained momentum in higher education for the purpose of educating students for service and deepening their commitment to serve (Koth, 2003). Beyond merely engaging students in service activities, service-learning connects these experiences with learning objectives in specific collegiate courses. Organized reflection of their service in the light of course objectives seems to heighten students' sense of civic engagement (Gehrke, 2008) and life skills development (Eylar, Giles, & Braxton, 1997).

Possibly, service-learning could translate to enhanced caring behaviors as well. Sikula and Sikula (2005) connect service-learning to spirituality, indicating that through reflection exercises, students have an opportunity to understand better their personal spirituality and to discover God's will for their lives. Research by Hunt (2007) indicates that service-learning is related to emotional, cross-cultural, and transformational learning, as well as to the development of caring. This conclusion resulted from a qualitative study that examined the lived experiences of student nurses caring for homeless families (pp. 278, 279). All these benefits are attractive professional enhancements for future practicing nurses.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The clinical arena represents an area of nursing education in which service-learning can be realized. In collaborative partnerships with the community and community service organizations, students and service partners reciprocally

benefit. Students provide community service while learning skills applicable to their professional practice.

Some ambition and creativity on the part of educators shows countless opportunities for community partnerships. Homeless shelters, indigent care clinics, battered women's shelters, food banks, and centers for particular culture groups are a few of many community sites needing volunteers.

Service opportunities are not restricted to situations involving the poor. Drug addiction centers, weight loss clinics, the local YMCA, and local nursing homes represent possibilities for potential liaisons. At Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, for example, students partner with a community agency to become "doulas" and then volunteer as support persons during childbirth (Jordan, Van Zandt, & Wright, 2008). The students learn obstetric skills and nurturing behaviors while providing support for this group of clients.

To arrange community partnerships, the educator begins by meeting with the agency representative to see how course learning objectives can be realized through volunteering for the organization. The more the community agency personnel are involved in planning projects, the more engaged they will be. Students learning about wellness and nutrition at our Christian college in rural North Carolina serve at a local food bank. They serve the clinic by loading bags with donated grocery items and carrying them to the vehicles of the needy. Students provide spiritual support to the recipients by offering to pray with them before they leave the facility. The agency participates by providing a tour of the facility and an orientation for the service work.

The experience helps students learn about the prevalence of poverty and the

allocation of resources in their community.

They make observations about the economic system and its associations with health and illness. In their post-experience reflection papers, a common theme is the satisfaction felt with the perception that they have made a difference in the lives of others through their service. Many of the students then continue to volunteer at this agency outside of the required course activity.

In our local indigent care medical clinic, nursing students have another opportunity for service-learning. They provide physical and spiritual support to the homeless and impoverished clients who use the clinic. The students learn by practicing nursing skills, by collaborating with primary healthcare providers, and by teaching endeavors. They gain insights into caring for the uninsured and often have opportunity to gain cultural exposure.

Some colleges have taken this concept a step further by creating their own (college-run) community-based nursing care centers. Sensenig (2007) reported that student nurses working in this type of collaborative college community clinic demonstrate refined therapeutic communication, teaching, critical thinking skills, appreciation for cultural diversity and the influence of culture on health practices, and ability to work well in collaborative groups.

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Another opportunity for the integration of service learning in a nursing curriculum is through the use of collaborative community projects. Some of the aforementioned organizations benefit from a wide range of specific projects orchestrated by the nursing students. In a pilot teaching service learning project, student nurses provided tobacco use education for elementary

school children in an impoverished region of New England. When tested on content after the educational program, 95% of the children scored an A (Bassi, Cray, & Caldrello, 2008).

Through experiences of this nature, students have the opportunity to learn organizational, leadership, and collaborative skills. Their critical thinking skill development is encouraged through the mandates of problem solving and creative planning.

Fund-raising projects can accomplish similar benefits for students, with obvious incentives to organizations. On our campus, students hosted a benefit for a national cancer organization. They learned about breast cancer, treatment, and local support resources in preparation for the event. They also learned about teamwork, organizing, communication, delegating, resource management, and reasoning through implementation of the drive. And they experienced the joy of giving a sizeable financial donation to benefit cancer research.

Service projects need not be connected necessarily to a specific community organization. With advanced course planning, conceivable service-learning projects can be integrated into any nursing course. For example, the students in our community health course organize and implement a yearly health fair benefiting the town and the college community. Screening tests are offered together with healthcare teaching. The students plan, advertise, order materials, and staff the fair. In our fundamentals nursing course, an influenza immunization clinic is held every fall. The students gain practice giving injections, teaching, and interacting with clients while learning organizational skills. The public benefits by obtaining vaccinations at a greatly reduced rate at a convenient location.

Students in the obstetrics course select a family expecting a newborn and conduct three home visits as an individualized teaching project.

Traditional teaching methods need not be abandoned to achieve a service-learning incentive in the classroom. Service projects complement other teaching strategies because a key component of service-learning is

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accomplishment of the course objectives through service. Educators can use classroom time to provide the conceptual framework for the projects, for planning, and for working through problems, adjusting contact hours to allow for work outside the classroom. Instructors and students can brainstorm on the first day of class and collaboratively develop ideas for service-learning that meet course objectives. The more actively the students participate in planning the projects, the more engaged they will be with their implementation, and the more likely they will be to appreciate the benefit of service.

GLOBAL LEARNING

The currently practicing nurse needs a global perspective related to service. The healthcare system in the United States is composed of clients from many cultural backgrounds. Diseases and healthcare problems in distant nations affect individuals and communities domestically. For example, immigration from developing countries with inadequate treatment of tuberculosis has facilitated the introduction of resistant strains of the microorganism in the United States. Humanitarian efforts on the part of the United States toward nations with serious healthcare needs place a demand on the resources in this country.

Although the suggestion to incorporate a study-abroad experience into a nursing curriculum is challenging, the potential for service-learning connected with such an incentive is distinct. The traditional sequencing and volume of nursing courses in most curricula can discourage prolonged (year-long or semester-long) study abroad. However, a shorter-term experience during a spring break, an intersession, or a summer session might be feasible.

We selected Mexico for the nursing study-abroad experience because we have a significant number of Hispanic clients in our healthcare system and many of our nursing students have studied Spanish. Mexico is geographically close, so travel there is not prohibitively expensive. The objective of this 3-credit-hour elective nursing course is for the students to gain cultural awareness while comparing and contrasting the healthcare systems in Mexico and the United States.

(Johanson, 2006). On the 9-day trip over spring break, we visit hospitals, schools of nursing, and cultural attractions, taking time also to experience local events, such as markets and fiestas.

Another course objective is for students to appreciate the concept of service. Beginning in the fall, students participate in planning for their service work in Mexico during March. They select service projects and organize planning efforts. In the past, they have collected toys, clothing, hygiene items, and over-the-counter medications for the Mayan villages they will visit in the Yucatan. Students have taught hygiene classes and English lessons to the Mayan people. At a boy's orphanage, they have organized games. They have collected and distributed school supplies to a rural Mayan elementary school and distributed Spanish-language New Testaments in hospital wards.

Appreciation for service emanates not only from projects but also from spending time with the people served. In the nursing home, students visit with residents, sit with them, and give hugs. They share a meal with the boys at the orphanage and just "hang out," communicating that the boys are not simply a "project" to the students but valuable as God's creation.

Students keep a journal related to their experiences, and the service component is yearly reported overwhelmingly as the favorite part of the course. A prevalent comment is that students have previously taken for granted the blessings they enjoy in the United States. Reflecting on those blessings encourages students to view service as an expression of gratitude toward God. After participation in the planned service activities, students consistently convey a desire to continue sharing their resources, time, and abilities with others in need.

Through their journals, students are encouraged to express their perceptions about the impact of their service on those served. Part of the learning process is to discover the multidimensional impact of service. On a recent trip to Mexico, during the distribution of school supplies in a rural Mayan elementary school, the school children gathered to sing native songs for the nursing students. Each nursing student received a personal gift of paper, rolled and tied with a red ribbon, on which the words to the song sung by the children was written in the Mayan language. Many of the students wrote how this gesture by the children to reciprocate an act of service touched them.

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THE REGISTERED NURSE AND SERVICE

Will students exposed to service-learning in nursing school continue to volunteer when they become registered nurses? There is no shortage of opportunities for nurses to volunteer. Nurses are needed at free medical clinics, outreach centers, and half-way houses. They also are needed for medical mission work and projects such as fund raising for medical disorders. Will the benefits coupled with service-learning translate to any measurable positive outcomes for a practicing professional nurse, such as

job satisfaction or caring behaviors? Would research show any correlations between service and measurable effects on those served? These questions have not yet been answered. Perhaps as more educators perceive the potential value of service-learning and the opportunities for students to escalate, researchers can address these questions empirically.

For now, it's a logical conclusion that members of a profession known to pride itself for caring cannot go wrong practicing the art of caring through service. There are many ways to serve and many ways to integrate the concept of service-learning into a traditional nursing curriculum including community collaborations, projects, and study-abroad experiences. Service-learning requires ambition, community awareness, creativity, and planning, but educators can serve as enthusiastic role models for students, and it is worth the effort. Students participating in service-learning receive preparatory skills for a career in a service-oriented profession, and that is a strong incentive for encouraging the practice of nursing.

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