What can we learn through Academic Service Learning in a Primary School?


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Abstract

Service learning has been used for many years to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses, preparing student teachers with real life learning experiences as they work with community groups in mutually beneficial projects. This paper outlines an innovative and challenging Academic Service Learning project which involved undergraduate students who were planning to enrol in a post-graduate teacher education degree course when they had completed their initial degree. The students had no teacher training but were keen to be involved in a school situation. They were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of creative arts-based projects with a range of teachers and classes. Academic Service Learning in this context was used to help prospective student teachers learn more about teaching strategies, behaviour management and subject content within the creative arts and to give them the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of working in a primary school. The students were asked to reflect on the benefits of the program, both to themselves and to the school. All were enthusiastic and positive in their responses to the project, and outcomes included an increase in the university students’ self-confidence, skills, knowledge, communication and behaviour management strategies.

Introduction

Academic Service Learning seeks to link university students with community agencies to provide mutually beneficial experiences, knowledge and outcomes. As the university students are involved in service projects within the agency, they are encouraged by their lecturers to reflect on their own learning as part of their university course. McCarthy defines Academic Service Learning as ‘linking academic instruction with community service, guided by reflection’ (McCarthy, 2003) and it is this ongoing reflection that sets service learning outside the parameters of work experience or volunteering in the community.

Service learning has been used for many years to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses, to provide authentic learning experiences for the students and to enhance community life, (Swick, 2001). Service learning can also link university students with their local community, combining service and learning to meet the mutually defined needs of each of the parties involved (Schaffer, Mather & Gustafson, 2000). It allows students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals as they develop skills and knowledge not necessarily developed in the normal lecture/tutorial setting, (Dudderar, D. & Stover, L., 2003).

As students engage in service learning they develop their skills in personal reflection, as well as their self-confidence, sense of civic responsibility and their interpersonal skills. Service learning can be successfully integrated into course content in a variety of curriculum areas and so enhance their understanding, practice and skills in these subjects, (Wells & Grabert, 2004). Involvement in service learning can also be used to help students planning to be teachers increase their own language and communication skills as they interact with children from diverse cultures and develop their understanding of the different backgrounds from which these children come (Meaney, Bohler, Scott & Hernandez, 2005). McCarthy (2003) sums up the pedagogical approach of community service by stating that the basic, interdependent components of service learning are experience, reflection and
knowledge. This project used these three aspects as foundational tools to consolidate and enhance the students’ learning.

Throughout the service learning project, the students focussed on teaching the creative arts in the primary school. Learning the arts for arts sake is vitally important. Children need to experience and understand the complexity and beauty of the world of music, drama, dance and visual arts for themselves. Being involved in the arts gives children the tools for lifelong learning within the arts so they have the opportunity for pleasure and for self-development, for creativity and self-expression, opening up a range of new and valuable learning experiences and opportunities they may have never realised existed. However quality arts programs also have far-reaching tangential effects that influence every aspect of children’s lives, both inside and outside of school, that enhance their social, cognitive, spiritual, physical, emotional and creative development and give them a deeper understanding of themselves and others. The arts enhance children’s academic achievement, develop respect for themselves and others, give them training for life and provide them with valid ways for self-expression, (Russell-Bowie, 2006). These were some of the reasons for ensuring the students were involved in the creative arts within this project.

**Aims of the MMADD about the arts project**

This paper seeks to answer the question, *What learning can occur through Academic Service Learning within the school situation?* To answer this question, it examines an innovative and challenging Academic Service Learning project that involved 13 undergraduate students who were planning to enrol in a post-graduate teacher education degree course when they had completed their initial degree. The students had no teacher training but were keen to be involved in a school situation. They were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of creative arts-based projects with a range of teachers and classes, with no payment being made to the teachers, as the program was planned to be mutually beneficial. The primary school was selected because the lecturer had built up positive relationships with the staff and was thus able to get permission for the whole school to be involved in this project. The creative arts Academic Service Learning program within the school was called *MMADD about the arts*, with the acrostic *MMADD* indicating the five art forms in which they would be involved, Music, Media, Arts, Dance and Drama.

Academic Service Learning in this context was used to give the future teacher-education students **experiences** to socialise them into the culture of the primary school and also give them the opportunity to gain first-hand experience of working in a primary school. The projects also aimed at helping them gain **knowledge** about teaching strategies, pedagogy, behaviour management and subject content within the creative arts and throughout the unit, students were asked to **reflect** on various facets of being a teacher, through observation, research, practical experiences and talking with the teachers and children.

**Context and Participants**

*The school*

The school involved in this service learning project (named Greentree Public School for this paper) is located in a low socio-economic area with 87% of children coming from a non-English speaking (mainly Arabic) background. Many of the teachers lacked confidence in implementing a creative arts program due to the lack of resources, time, training, priority and support in this key learning area. These subjects (music, media, art, dance and drama), although very important within the holistic development of children, are often given minimal time and priority in teacher education courses and primary schools, and as a consequence are often ineffectively taught or not taught at all on a regular basis in the classroom, (Jeanneret, 1997; Lepherd, no date; Mills, 1989).
The students

The thirteen students who undertook the creative arts community service unit were all enrolled in undergraduate degrees and were planning to enrol on the Bachelor of Teaching postgraduate course when they had completed their first degree. This was their only path to becoming primary school teachers, as the university no longer offered an undergraduate teacher education program. Most of the students had experience and interest in one or more of the art forms and all were eager to receive hands-on experience within the primary school setting.

The University subject

As part of their undergraduate degree, students could enrol in a 20 credit point unit called Learning through Community Service, which was equivalent in length and rigour to two university units and was spread over a five month period. The unit was organised by strands that represented disciplines across the College of Arts; these included International Buddies, Mentoring of UWS students requiring assistance in literacy skills, ESL mentoring of recent immigrants in local communities, Video-making and the creative arts education project, MMADD about the Arts. Thirteen students completed this creative arts project within the Learning Through Community Service unit and were based at Greentree Public School.

Methodology

In order to ascertain what learning was occurring within the MMADD about the Arts project, the students completed surveys, reflections and assignments. In the introductory on-campus session, the students completed a qualitative survey in which they indicated their experiences in teaching and in the arts and their anticipated outcomes from the unit.

During the 14 weeks of semester, the students completed at least 80 hours in a school setting, involved in one or more of the above projects. Every three weeks they wrote a reflection to document their learning in relation to the context of their projects, the learning experiences in which they were involved, the classroom management strategies they were observing and learning, and their evaluation of the learning within the project for themselves, the children, the staff and the local community. A final assignment summarised and analysed these reflections and then developed a synthesis of their learning throughout the whole semester as they articulated their own philosophy of teaching. Throughout the semester the students were involved in observation, consultation, peer assessment, and interviewing teachers about the outcomes of the different projects in relation to themselves, the children the staff and the school community.

In the final session on-campus, the students completed a qualitative survey indicating what they had learned from being involved in the different MMADD about the Arts projects.

MMADD about the Arts: Experiences

McCarthy (2003) states that that the basic, interdependent components of service learning are experience, reflection and knowledge. Within the MMADD about the arts strand of the Learning Through Community Service unit, the students initially met with their lecturer for three days of intensive on-campus sessions that included lectures on the concept of community service and practical workshops relating to creative arts education. The principal of the school came to speak to the students and answer any questions and DVDs and photos were shown of the children from the school involved in creative arts activities to give them the context of their projects. A questionnaire completed about the students indicated their experience and interest in the arts and a survey completed by the teachers from the school indicated in what areas they would like the students to work throughout the school. From this information, three main projects were developed and implemented by the university students, within the school community; these included:
1. Artistes in Residence: Training in Schools (ARTS)

Within this project, the university students worked one day a week or two half days in a local school, in one or more of their selected art forms and in one or more classes throughout the school. The university students and teachers worked together to plan how their skills and knowledge would be used effectively throughout the day.

The University students could work with one class throughout the day, or across one stage, or in a variety of classes. Some of the ways the students, teachers and children worked together in the creative arts each day included:

• Thematic team teaching with the class teacher, using a theme integrating music, art, dance and/or drama to enhance literacy skills;
• Kinderarts: using the art forms to support what is being taught within the Kindergarten curriculum to deepen learning and engage the children more effectively;
• Implementing a given or developed sequential program within one or more art form to develop specific skills, knowledge and attitudes in a particular class, grade, stage or other selected groupings; the program could be one from the set text or other creative arts resource, one the teachers had written or one developed by the student.
• Team teaching lessons with the class teacher on the selected art form(s) to a class.
• Working towards a Creative Arts Fun Day or Harmony Day where all children in the school are involved in creative arts activities throughout the day, organised and implemented by the university students.
• Big books for Little Kids: working with a small group of children to write a children’s story, publish it in a large format, illustrate it, practise a Reader’s Theatre for it and add appropriate instruments to represent the characters and events in the story. The children would then put this all together and present it to the Kindergarten classes, as well as local pre-schools in the area.

2. After School Arts Program (ASAP)

The university students were involved in running creative arts workshops after school in their selected art form(s) with teachers and K-6 children from the school. This program was offered for one and a half hours each week on Thursday afternoons; the university students were expected to attend and work with the children and teachers for at least 12 sessions. They were to be responsible for team (or solo) teaching a group of 6 - 8 students from years 5/6 in one of the art forms; they organised resources for each session, set these up and cleared them away and reflected on each session and the overall program. Each set of learning experiences were planned to continue over three weeks with one group of children, then repeated for the next group of children over the following three weeks, and so on.

3. Kids Art in the community (KAIC)

The university students worked with teachers and children from local schools to develop, curate and coordinate an art exhibition in the local community. Children from local schools would be invited to be involved in art workshops on a community-relevant theme, as they prepared for this exhibition. The resulting artworks were hung in selected shops and community buildings in the local suburb for several weeks after the launch. As part of this project, university students were involved in:

• Contacting each school with information about the workshops and exhibition;
• Running art workshops on the given theme in each participating school and/or class;
• Approaching the local shopping centre and asking them to exhibit children’s artworks;
• Collecting, framing and curating the artworks to create the exhibition;
• Publicising the workshops and exhibition;
• Reflecting on the effectiveness of the workshops and exhibition.

MMADD about the Arts: Knowledge

As part of the introductory on-campus sessions, the students learned through lectures and workshops the underlying concepts of service learning as well as the basic elements of each of the
creative art forms. They also learned about integrating the arts through being involved in the implementation of practical thematic creative arts units during the workshops and interacting with the principal and lecturer around a variety of discussion topics.

Another source of knowledge for the students was their set text, which provided them with a theoretical foundation for teaching the creative arts, as well as many practical ideas for teaching each of the art forms and integrating the arts within the classroom. Students were also encouraged to research the content for any lessons in which they were involved while at the school and through this, many learned new skills and consolidated previous learning within the arts.

The students were also encouraged to discuss their own classroom interaction with their teachers and gain pointers for improvement and suggestions for future lessons. These discussions formed for the students a solid foundation of knowledge about pedagogy and teaching philosophies that they gradually put into practice and internalised.

As well as gaining knowledge through their involvement in the program, students also brought their own knowledge about the creative arts to the school. Some students had specific and developed skills in one or more art forms, while others had a more general knowledge of the arts. Some students brought to the program their own life experiences of working with children in different out-of-school settings, while others brought their knowledge gained from their experiences as parents. All of this knowledge was recognised, valued and used as they worked and reflected throughout the project.

**MMADD about the Arts: Reflections**

Reflection is an important part of community service and therefore the students were required to reflect in various aspects of their learning experiences within the school community throughout their time there. These reflections were each focussed on a different aspect of learning to teach, as follows:

*Reflection 1: Situational analysis*
  - Reflection on the contextual description of the school and the classes in which they were involved.
  - Project plan: overview and reflection on what projects they were to be involved in, and how these would fit into the given timeframe.

*Reflection 2: Planned Learning Experiences*
  - **WHO?** Reflections on themselves as learners and teachers, their observations of the staff and children with whom they worked.
  - **WHERE?** Reflections and observations on the teaching and learning environments in which they worked.
  - **WHY?** Reflections on the purpose and anticipated outcomes of the learning experiences they were planning, both for themselves and for the children.
  - **WHAT?** Overview of learning experiences they were planning in relation to each project.
  - **HOW?** Reflections on the use of resources and teaching strategies they used and observed being used.

*Reflection 3: Reflections on Management Strategies*

Students were asked to reflect on the management strategies used by their teachers and by themselves, in relation to the CREATIVE classroom management model, (Russell-Bowie, 2006) and current research; i.e. reflections were focussed on:

- Children
- Rewards, rules and routines
- Environment
- Attitudes
- Time and resources management
- Interactive activities
- Variety
• **Enthusiasm**

**Reflection 4: Reflections on learning within the project**

Students were also asked to reflect on and evaluate the value of the experiences in which they have participated, using a variety of assessment and evaluation measures (e.g. observations, consultation, using outcomes and indicators, self-assessment and peer-assessment) in relation to:

- Their own personal and professional development throughout the unit
- The benefits the teachers saw of the university students being involved in their classrooms
- The development of children through their involvement in the creative arts learning experiences, in relation to their:
  - Academic achievement
  - Respect for themselves and others
  - Training for life and generic skills
  - Self-expression and development in the arts
- General overall reflection on benefits to the school community (staff, principal, parents, etc)

**Final Portfolio**

As a culminating learning experience, students were required to reflect on the following, based on their previous four reflections:

- Why do you want to be a teacher?
- What is a good teacher?
- What is your understanding of the process of learning?

**Results**

Throughout this *Learning Through Community Service* project, service learning was used to enhance and provide a strong foundation for the students’ future involvement in teacher education courses, as well as providing authentic learning experiences for the students and enhancing the community life of the school, (Swick, 2001). It allowed students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals as they developed skills and knowledge not necessarily developed in the normal teacher education lecture/tutorial setting, (Duderar, D. & Stover, L., 2003). The unit emphasised the three important foundations of service learning, that of experience, reflection and knowledge (McCarthy, 2003) and these were key themes arising from the students’ analysis of the outcomes of the unit. All involved with the project felt that it was a mutually valuable and significant learning experience for children, student teachers and classroom teachers alike.

The students gained practical knowledge and reflected regularly on their experiences. One student commented:

- *This subject had given an opportunity to the university students to gain hands on experience and get a better understanding of what teaching would be like. It also gave us the opportunity to participate in a wonderful program that allows us to use our experience and knowledge to give back to a school that would normally go without, all with attaining academic recognition. … It confirms that I made the right decision to study to become a teacher and I know that I have learnt many valuable tools and resources that will give me a head start when I do my teacher education course and it has also given me confidence in myself.*

**Outcomes for students**

Service learning can be used to enhance and strengthen teacher education courses, to provide authentic learning experiences for the students, (Swick, 2001). As part of their reflections, students reflected on their own development and learning throughout the unit, which included a recognition that they had learned much about teaching, their confidence and competence had increased significantly, they had confirmation that they wanted to be teachers and they learned about the importance of teaching the creative arts. Some comments to exemplify this, included:
Changes in confidence and competence

- I have noticed immense changes in my confidence and competence within my teaching experience at the school. I was initially nervous and anxious but now I just feel motivated, excited and very comfortable teaching. (DH)

Learning about teaching

- After each time I worked with the children the teacher gave me feedback to improve my performance, and this has helped me learn vital teaching skills. (AD)
- Hands-on teaching, being thrown into the ‘deep end’ and having no previous teaching experience or learning education has made me realise that with a bit of help and study we can achieve anything that we set our minds to. At first we were overwhelmed, but now we are able to say that we can plan a lesson, consult with a teacher and experience a wonderful school! (EC)

Confirming their chosen career

- Several students indicated that they had decided to become teachers, although they had initially been hesitant about this career choice, and one student changed from planning to be a psychologist to becoming a primary school teacher.

I remember my first day in the KG classroom where we were just helping the teacher. I thought the children were all so lovely but I never remotely thought I would want to teach KG. As the weeks progressed, I couldn’t believe my change in thinking towards these children. I really loved teaching children and they responded very well to me. This came about as an increase in confidence, positive reinforcement from my teacher as well as chatting with her about what she thought of my lesson plans, and perhaps most importantly, bouncing ideas and getting suggestions from other students. (DD)

Teaching the creative arts

- I feel I have learned so much in the last 10 weeks and I feel comfortable that I would be able to integrate a quality arts program into my own teaching pedagogy. This practical experience has really made me made realise just how important the arts are and what children get out of a good arts program. Initially I thought the arts was (sic) just painting etc, now I realise there is so much more to that, the arts build on children’s life skills and give them tools to negotiate the adult world. Children are given a safe space to practice these new skills and become well educated, accepting adults. It will be an experience I will never forget. (AS)

Job opportunities

As a result of their involvement in this unit, one student took up a position at the school as a creative arts teacher for pre-school children, one day a week and another was accepted as a creative arts teacher one day a week at a special school.

Outcomes for the teachers

Academic Service Learning allows students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes (Dudderar, D. & Stover, L., 2003). Teachers were also asked about the benefits they received by having the university students work with them in their classes; these included that they had new ideas and inspiration about teaching the creative arts, and that they appreciated having other adults in the classroom so they could work individually with children. Some comments related to this included:

Inspired to teach more creative arts

- Some of the staff have said they would feel more comfortable teaching a lesson involving music now after seeing my lessons and experiencing music in a simple, yet effective way. (JC)
- The main benefit the teacher has obtained is that she gained some experience on how to incorporate the arts into the everyday lessons and still get through the required curriculum. (SC)

Extra pairs of hands

- Mrs C informed us that she only does painting when we are in the classroom to help. She enjoys having us in her classroom as it is a new experience for her class, and she is able to work on other projects, such as individually testing each student on their numbers and letters. (AD)
- By having extra helpers in the different classes, it allowed for more attention to be paid to the children. We were able to provide more individualised education and to get to know the students on a personal level. (AS)
Outcomes for the Children

The arts enhance children’s academic achievement, develop respect for themselves and others, give them training for life and provide them with valid ways for self-expression, (Russell-Bowie, 2006). Through observation and consultation, the students and teachers noted that many children had developed academically, emotionally, socially and artistically as a result of being involved in the creative arts learning experiences provided by the program. Comments about the children’s responses included:

Academic achievement
- The staff told me that I have been able to give the children experiences that otherwise they would have been deprived of (sic). (SO)
- The music lessons have encouraged group work, learning how to develop creativity together and acknowledging each others’ work through little performances in class. (EB)
- Their teacher told me that through involvement through the arts, the ESL children have improved in every aspect of learning new vocabulary and speech. (CF)
- The teachers said the program gave the children an opportunity to experience activities in further detail that may have been avoided in their classroom for various reasons. (SL)
- The teachers often single out children in their discussion (in the staff room) and note the improvements seen in the child. The teachers often express how amazed they are in the changes in particular children, and they regularly credit these changes to the creative arts work that we do in their classrooms. (BT)

Respect for self and others
- Through the music lessons, we were able to teach the children social skills such as taking turns, social awareness such as keeping out hands to ourselves and respecting others, and learning appropriate behaviours and responses. (HS)
- It was amazing to see the children accept and encourage one child who has autism to speak up and voice what he has learned in the lesson using aspects of drama. (OV)
- Through the arts I was able to reinforce concepts the children were learning, and also help to teach them respect for each other, such as listening to each other, turn taking and sharing. (ER)

Training for life
- The teachers have told me how the music lessons have helped calm down ‘problem’ children, behaviours are better, their attention has improved as has their willingness to learn. (DD)
- While doing basket making over the three weeks, the children learnt to appreciate the work for the process and involvement of the task, and not just the end result. This teaches the children both patience and also to appreciate their efforts and enjoyment that went into the finished product. (KG)
- My teacher said she definitely saw an improvement in most children’s listening skills over the period that I was in the classroom. (SV)
- Through the dance lessons, the children were developing team work, positive reinforcement and turn taking skills, all of which are important in the adult world. (PL)

Self-expression
- The children were able to use the arts to express their individuality and excel in an area that they enjoyed. (KG)
- My teacher really thought the children benefited greatly from the experience as it is not something they often get exposed to and having people come in and teach arts specific lessons is greatly inspiring for children who get bored easily with everyday curriculum. (PL)
- Through music, art, drama and dance, I was able to stimulate children’s imagination and creativity and as a result the children learned how to keep focus and how to communicate with themselves and others through different mediums. (SO)

Outcomes for the school community

Service learning can link university students with their local community, combining service and learning to meet the mutually defined needs of each of the parties involved (Schaffer, Mather & Gustafson, 2000). The students, parents and staff also commented on the benefits received by the school community from the university students being involved in the creative arts community service project. Comments included:
The parents commented to me about how much their children had enjoyed the drumming classes and they enjoyed seeing their children involved in such a fun and productive class. (DD)

I found that the parents thought that teaching creative arts in school was a good idea because it keeps the children active and doing things that are enjoyable, while at the same time getting the basic learning skills necessary for the rest of their lives. (BT)

I was under the impression that parents wouldn’t be too keen on their children doing something a bit different to their set school curriculum. However, after Harmony Day, and all the different creative arts activities all of us university students assisted in, the response from the parents was amazing, they were so pleased that their children were involved in so many different activities associated with so many different cultures. (SH)

A child being able to display their artworks in a public place is highly beneficial for the whole school. It allows the school, as well as individual children, to be noticed for their talents and efforts; it also allows self-confidence to grow within children and also the realisation for their self-worth. (CS)

Challenges

Although there were very few negative comments about the projects, from the students, teachers or children, there were some challenges noted by the lecturer involved. Firstly there had been one instance of a personality clash between a small group of students and a teacher. Secondly, timetabling commitments meant it was impossible for the lecture to meet with all students together apart from the initial on-campus workshops. Thirdly, it was a challenge for some students to see their commitment to the school, teachers and children as MORE than just completing a university subject, and finally, there were almost too many students for the one small school.

In response to these challenges, the next time the unit was offered the following actions were implemented:

- Instigation of a weekly online e-journal which was not assessed, and in which student described what they had done that week, what they had learned and what action they would make as a result of this. This allowed the lecturer to keep in touch with each of the students and to find out about difficulties before they became too large to handle effectively. The completion of the e-journal also meant that face-to-face meetings between the lecturer and the students were not so crucial.
- A code of behaviour and expectations for students was developed and disseminated to all students.
- Students were allowed to organise their own school placement for four hours a week and work the other 4 hours a week in the common school.

These actions, implemented in the next semester, have significantly decreased the challenges noted in the first semester.

Conclusion

Involvement in service learning within a local primary school setting provided the prospective teacher education students with a valuable opportunity to use their own knowledge within the classroom, to gain new knowledge from their teachers, peers, action and research, and to experience first hand the challenges and rewards of teaching the creative arts to children. Through the cycle of action and reflection they learned much more than if they had just participated in tutorials without the focussed teaching experience. Although a theoretical and practical framework for teaching the arts in the primary school had been covered in the on-campus workshops, in the set text and within their own research, it was not until they actually had the opportunity to teach lessons, that they ‘discovered’ these strategies and incorporated them into their teaching.

The MMADD about the arts project allowed students to be involved in the active engagement of the learning process and to interact with other people for authentic purposes in order to achieve definable goals, (Dudderar, D. & Stover, L., 2003). As the project came to an end, the students realised they had increased their confidence and competence as neophyte teachers, they had learned much about
teaching and creative arts education and they were confirmed in their choice of career. The school community also benefited from the project as children were developing skills, knowledge, attitudes and understandings through being involved in the arts and working with the university students and teachers had extra assistance in their classrooms and learned new ideas in relation to implementing the creative arts.

One student summed up the community service creative arts experience as follows:

*I have created an image in my mind about my experience at the school: I imagine teachers, parents, university students and children all sitting at a big, round table. We are all learning from each other, we are all equal and most importantly we are at the table for the same reason which is a child’s education is paramount. We all agree that there is more than one way to teach a subject, and the Creative Arts projects have been a success and everyone at the table is enjoying the children’s learning outcomes. (ER)*

References


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