Service Learning, Drama, and Social Change: A University Literature Class Takes on Bullying in Middle School

Mary Giffin
Professor of English
Walsh University
North Canton, Ohio
U.S.A. 44709

Abstract

A university service learning course in drama set out to make a difference in the lives of inner-city youth while learning about dramatic literature. The course partnered with a local middle school to create short plays on the theme of bullying. This article documents the impact of service learning on the academic learning of the university students and their effectiveness in changing attitudes towards violence at the middle school.

Keywords*:* Service learning; drama; bullying; teaching English literature

1. Introduction -- Context and Rationale for Service Learning

Service learning has long been shown to be an effective pedagogy in higher education, as for example, Eyler& Giles (1999, 2001) and Moore & Lin (2010) have shown. This pedagogy enhances academic learning, while also promoting civic learning and personal growth. Service learning projects in liberal arts courses develop critical thinking, problem solving and decision making skills, often more effectively than classroom study alone (Battistoni, 1995).

University service learning projects can take various forms. In some courses, students perform direct service to community members, such as tutoring young children or visiting the elderly. In other courses, students may complete a project to meet a community need, such as planting a garden or creating a Facebook page for a non-profit. In presentation-based projects, students develop a program that can be presented with, or on behalf of, a community group, as when a communication class produces programs to help promote the services of local agencies. Other courses may be problem-based; for example, a chemistry class may test local water to answer questions about its composition and safety (National Campus Compact, 2015; University of Oregon, 2013).

The university class in this study combined the first three of these types of service to promote academic learning about dramatic literature through the hands-on creation of plays. The students performed direct service, mentoring and directing adolescents in an afterschool drama program on the topic of bullying at an inner city middle school. Their work was project-based, since their goal was to write and rehearse a group of short plays for performance. Thus, their project was also presentation-based, since the students brought the middle schoolers and the plays to campus for a performance at the university.

Grobman & Rosenberg (2015) have demonstrated that service learning can be an especially effective pedagogy for the study of literature at the college level. Hansen (2010, 2015) has explored the use of service learning in teaching dramatic literature, particularly Shakespeare, and has recorded the benefits for both college learners and their elementary-school-aged partners. Outside the service learning context, drama has proven an effective pedagogy across the disciplines (Lee, Patall, Cawthon & Steingut, 2015), and particularly successful in educating school-aged children about bullying, as the success of many projects in schools has been documented. Many professional theaters have staged anti-bullying plays in schools (Belliveau, 2004). In school classrooms, teachers have created plays about bullying prevention both with and for their students using process drama (Baer & Glasgow, 2008; Joronen Hekamies & Astedt-Kurki, 2011), forum theater(Bhukhanwala, F. 2014; Burton, B., 2013; Fredland, 2010; Gourd & Gourd, 2011; Johnson, 2001) and educational psycho-drama (Beall, 2001; O'Toole & Burton, 2005).

2. The Purpose of Integrating Service Learning into the Introduction to Drama Course

Through service learning we hoped to deepen our students' experience of literature by showing them first-hand that an understanding of dramatic form could be valuable in a real-world setting. We also wanted to help them improve their critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities by using drama experientially in a community context. Following Cipolle (2010), we hoped both to enhance student learning and to create social change: we wanted to determine whether involving our students with inner-city youth would benefit our own students' academic learning, and whether engaging in drama could change the attitudes of inner-city students towards violence. We also wanted to become "the face of college" for the middle school students and to provide a welcome to campus for them and their parents that might lead them to consider going to university in the future. Following Boal (1979) we believed that drama created by the middle schoolers themselves out of direct engagement with each other and with the theme could empower them to understand and confront bullying in their daily lives at school. For these reasons, service learning was integrated with the course objectives for Introduction to Drama, offered annually in the English Department at Walsh University.

Introduction to Drama meets an undergraduate distribution requirement in literature, as well as a service learning requirement for all students at our university. The students in the class are in their second and third year of study. The course involves reading plays and analyzing their structure, while understanding their historical and cultural context, especially issues of race and gender. Our course texts included Aristophanes' *Lysistrata,* Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* Moliere's *Tartuffe,* Athol Fugard's *Master Harold and the Boys,* August Wilson's *Fences,* and *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theater Project. Because they focus on power relations and the abuse of power in social settings, the plays we studied provided inherent parallels and support and for theme of bullying in the plays to be developed with the middle scholars.

Hansen's students (2015) focused on a single play, Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*, re-working it in a contemporary context with Title I elementary school children, who then performed the updated play under the direction of the college students. Our application of service and our course focus differs from Hansen's in several ways. Our community partner was a Title I middle school, and the middle school students themselves wrote plays on the theme of bullying under the supervision of the university students. Hansen's primary outcome was the development of a single interpretation of Shakespeare's play by his own students, scripted in such a way that it could be understood and performed by the children. Our outcomes were an understanding of, and ability to apply, dramatic structure, as well as to create social change by revising the attitudes of middle schoolers to violence.

3. Method

The class of fifteen university students was divided into four groups of three or four students each. Each university group worked with a group of four or five middle schoolers. These combined groups met once a week for nine weeks after school for an hour. Through improvisation and discussion, they created a ten-minute play, which they scripted and rehearsed. The university students began by getting to know the middle schoolers, sharing their own experiences with bullying and discovering how the middle schoolers understood the topic. Preparation for the work on bullying was limited. The city school district has a no-tolerance policy on bullying, and teachers are encouraged to discuss the topic in class when incidents occur, but bullying and conflict resolution are not formal topics in the curriculum. The staff at the middle school follow the Olweus system of identifying and dealing with bullying as it arises. They suggested that we explore bullying in several different settings with the middle school students, such as the classroom, the school bus and the cyber world, places where most middle school bullying incidents took place.

At the end of the semester, all of the middle school students, together with their teachers and parents, came to university for the performance of the plays. They were welcomed with a tour of the campus and a pizza party, followed by the performance and a talk-back. The audience consisted of middle school students, teachers and parents university students, faculty and staff.

4. Assessment of the learning of the Middle Schoolers by the University Students

Multiple forms of assessment were used(Gelman,2001). Informal assessment occurred daily. After each session at the school, the university students reflected orally on what had happened in their groups. They commented on each child's participation and contributions to the drama work, as well as the challenges they faced in keeping the focus on the activity, and their strategies to bring back focus onto the play.

Formal assessment included a reflection essay written at the end of the semester, in which the university students assessed their effectiveness with the middle schoolers by commenting on the degree to which the middle school students had been engaged in the drama work. After the performance at the university, the middle schoolers themselves were asked to sum up what they had learned about bullying. The middle school students who responded in this informal talk-back reflection showed a keen desire to put their knowledge of bullying and conflict resolution into practice at school.

The university students reflected orally on a daily basis on the attitudes toward violence which they encountered in their working groups at the school. They also completed an end-of-semester questionnaire, answering the following questions.

1) How many of the ideas for the action of the play came from the middle schoolers, and how many did you (university students) provide? Two groups said that the middle schoolers provided most of the ideas for the action, while two groups said they contributed about an equal number of ideas for the play's action.
2) Were the middle schoolers able to supply resolutions to the bullying incident? All four groups said that the middle schoolers were able to do this without help from the university students.
3) If you answered "yes" to the previous question, were the resolutions suggested by the middleschoolers violent or non-violent? One group said all the resolutions offered by the middle schoolers were non-violent: finding allies and authorities to help. Three groups said some resolutions proposed by the middle schoolers were violent (hitting, punching), while others were non-violent.
4) Did you see any evidence of a progression from violence to non-violence in the middle schoolers' approaches to the play's conflict or in their behavior with each other?

Three groups explained that the middle schoolers' approaches were initially violent, but that they eventually offered non-violent resolutions. One group said that the middle schoolers never proposed any violent resolutions, only non-violent ones.

The answers to Question 1 show that, for the most part, the students recognized what bullying was, since they could imagine incidents for the action of their plays, though one group needed to be taught what bullying was before they could construct the play. These answers also show that the teachers and staff at the middleschool had made effective presentations of the topic and that we were, for the most part, simply reinforcing what the middle schoolers already knew, though one group seems to have introduced and taught the concept through the drama work.

The answers to Question 2 show that the students had already had some instruction, if not experience, in how to deal with bullies. They already knew about finding allies and talking to authorities, as their plays showed, without having to ask the university students for ideas.

The answers to Question 3indicate that the middle school students in one of the four groups had learned non-violent ways to stand up to bullies before they began the drama work, while the other three groups had not. Their initial response was to use physical fighting to resist bullying.

The answers to Question 4 show that the groups that used violence initially were able to revise their thinking about the best way to resist. By the end of the semester, they were able to imagine and dramatize peaceful and effective solutions. Their ideas in most cases progressed from the use of violence to responding through non-violent means. In making these decisions, their ideas were probably shaped by the presentations and interventions they had seen at the school, but they may also have been influenced by the ideas of the university students. The drama work solidified or reinforced what the middle schoolers had learned about bullying, and took it one step closer to use in daily life.

In addition to learning about bullying, the middle school students also evidenced personal growth as a result of the project. The university students wrote in their final reflection essays that the middle school students were developing self-confidence and positive self-expression during the after-school sessions. They said that the middle schoolers asked them about college, were eager to visit the campus and expressed a desire to return. The university students believed they had been "the face of college" for the middle school students, who might develop a desire to attend university.

5. Academic Learning of the University Students
Writing plays with the middle school students required the university students to use creative and critical thinking, as they applied their understanding of dramatic form to the drama work.

They were required to oversee the creation of a play that dramatized both the escalation and de-escalation of conflict that included harassment or violence. They demonstrated their understanding of drama as a genre through the use of rising and falling action and dialogue to tell a story, rather than description and narration. In this process, they were required to evaluate the completeness and effectiveness of each scene, noticing where the play needed additional dialogue reveal character or supplementary action to make the story complete. The university students assessed their own progress during the semester by creating character descriptions and a scene-by-scene outline of the play at midterm, which they compared to the finished script that they used for performance. These artifacts were also used by the instructor to assess the students' academic work.

In their final reflection essays on service learning, the university students explored the purpose of drama itself, using their experience in the after-school program to argue the value of drama to entertain, to instruct and to create social change. They noted that the plays themselves were both instructive and entertaining, but they placed most emphasis on the changes that the drama work itself had created in empowering the middle school students to prevent and resist bullying, developing their self-confidence and sense of self-efficacy. They stated that drama had become an agent of social change in this project.

6. Civic Learning of the University Students

In addition to the final reflection essay, a final assessment of service learning at the university is made with a survey administered to each service learning course at the end of each semester. This survey measures the effectiveness of each course project in developing academic, personal and civic growth in the students. In the drama course, with the exception of two students, the university students had not worked directly with children or middle school students in poverty, and both the university survey results and the final reflection essay for the course showed that civic learning had increased significantly among the students in the class.

One important indicator was the way they reported the challenges they faced. For example, they understood that the inconsistent attendance they experienced at the sessions was due, not to laziness on the part of the middle school students, but to the lack of transportation and changing work schedules faced by the families. They were also able to connect the middleschoolers' frequent lack of focus and concentration with some of the challenges faced at home, such as parents' own lack of education and the pressures of survival. Many of the university students said that their assumptions about people in poverty had changed. They suggested that the program as a whole be extended, allowing more time to build trust and understanding, as well as to write and rehearse before the performance date

7. Personal Growth of the University Students

The university students' personal growth was also significantly enhanced by this project. They noted that they were better at teamwork from having to apply that skill outside the classroom. They recognized that they could add leadership and organizing skills to their resumes, and several reported later that they had been hired for internships and summer work with children and teens based on their service learning experience. One student majoring in education decided to aim for work in an inner city school, while a nursing major shifted her focus from pediatrics to work as a school nurse with young adults. Like the middle school students themselves, the university students developed their self-efficacy through participation in the project.

8. Conclusion: Successful Application of Service Learning Pedagogy

The project incorporated the best practices of successful service learning pedagogy (Ohio Campus Compact 2015). First, the project was clearly outlined in the course syllabus as a goal linked to several learning outcomes. It enhanced the learning outcomes of the course as a direct result of the application of course content. It involved students' direct experience with a community-based organization during which the students worked to meet needs identified by that organization. It involved continuous, challenging, connected and contextualized reflection on the experience and the learning. The project increased the academic learning of the university students by requiring them to apply their knowledge of dramatic form in a real-world setting, as well as to understand the purpose of drama from first-hand experience. At the same time, the project helped the university students to develop their civic learning by giving them direct experience of youth and families living in poverty in their city, while it also promoted personal growth and in some cases shaped their academic and career goals.

They realized that through the relationships they built with the middle schoolers and the mentoring and teaching that took place in those relationships, they had helped create social change. The middle schoolers in the project benefited both academically and personally from participating in the project. They developed a clearer understanding of bullying and how to prevent and overcome it. They also developed confidence to influence the behavior of their peers for the better and to believe in their own effectiveness as advocates for themselves and for others. In this respect, they became agents of social change in their school. Through direct interaction with the university students, they also began to imagine their own interest and potential to attend university.

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