Service Learning:
The Good, the Bad, and the Challenges in the Time of COVID-19

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What is Service Learning, the Planning/Implementation Process, and Pandemic Adaptation Ideas

Speaker’s Background and Purpose of the Session

Speaker’s background:
• An instructor of service-learning courses since 2012
• An author of a 2018 book on service-learning processes and outcomes

Purpose of the session:
• Present one approach of a service-learning process
• Discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the process steps
• Engage in a discussion of “what works” and factors to consider for all involved in the service-learning experience
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What is “Service Learning” (SL)?

• A hybrid of a classroom instruction and field placement experience
• Different than a typical singular field experience in that multiple class members may be a part of the site placement – creating a “team” experience
• The structure of the class meetings creates a unique sharing of experiences across multiple and varied sites (in-class discussions, discussion board postings)
• Training occurs in both the classroom (e.g., library research training, journaling guidance, and proposal and paper writing feedback) and onsite (e.g., skill training)
• Two basic phases to the SL process:
  ✓ Phase I: Sample Pre-planning Timeline for SL Preparation
  ✓ Phase II: Sample Timeline for SL Training Process Over 16 Weeks
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Phase I: Sample Pre-planning Timeline for SL Preparation

- Pre-arrange available SL sites
  - 5 months before class

- Conduct pre-screening interviews of interested students
  - 3 months before class

- Match students to SL sites
  - 4 weeks before class

- E-introduce SL students to SL site supervisors
  - 3 weeks before class

- Have site supervisors and students collaborate on SL site goals
  - First 2 weeks of class
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Phase I: Pre-planning Issues to Cover with SL Placement Sites

- Confirm the willingness of the site to take one or more SL interns to engage in an in-depth onsite training experience*

*COVID-19 Challenge: Community sites are varied in their ability to “adapt” to the needed changes due to this ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and this situation continues to affect how sites perceive their roles as both a community-serving site and as a supervising site for the intern students.
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Phase I: Pre-planning Issues to Cover with SL Placement Sites, continued

- Discuss expectations of intern(s)’s performance and any preliminary training/testing (e.g., background check) prior to the SL intern(s) beginning onsite work*

*COVID-19 Challenge: Site supervisors have expressed concerns that their shifting services are dynamically responding to an ongoing pandemic and, accordingly, in working with a vulnerable aging population. The traditional “model” of SL intern involvement is evolving as sites adjust to COVID-19.
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Phase I: Pre-planning Issues to Cover with SL Students

• Confirm the willingness of the SL interns to commit to 90 hours of onsite work to a specific site in addition to attending class and completing class coursework*

*COVID-19 Challenge: Some of the sites are currently in the process of permitting some face-to-face interactions with older site participants and their families, raising concerns among students about COVID-19 exposure. Many of the students are caregivers of older adults in their families. In addition, most of the students are either unemployed and seeking new work or are frontline workers with a dramatic increase in work hours affecting their availability during the COVID-19 pandemic.
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Phase I: Pre-planning Issues to Cover with SL Students, continued

• Discuss SL intern’s interests (e.g., career training focus) and expectations in doing onsite SL site work for “matching” purposes with an SL training site*

*COVID-19 Challenge: All students have expressed concerns regarding the current complexity of role-related obligations (e.g., work, family, childcare, and eldercare) and potential COVID-19 exposure issues with sites’ plans for onsite activities (e.g., concern about the need for clear COVID-19 site guidelines and access to PPE resources). The choice of working with specific populations has been impacted by COVID-19.
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**Phase I: Pre-planning Issues to Cover with SL Students, continued**

- Create site goals that meet the expectations of the assigned SL site and are feasible in reflection upon the students’ life and work obligations*

*COVID-19 Challenge: In mid-spring and continuing into the summer, the students’ need to cope with “situational ambiguity” in both their site placement and personal lives became very apparent in determining what would be viable (e.g., remote site work). This feeling of ambiguity was also expressed by the sites, complicating the goal-related decision-making process.
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Phase II: Sample Timeline for SL Training Process Over 16 Weeks

- **Finalize SL student’s learning contract**
  - 4 weeks into the course

- **Start SL onsite work (e.g., 10-12 hours per week for 8 weeks = goal of 90 hours) and journaling**
  - 6 weeks into the course

- **Have the site supervisor provide feedback at midpoint (e.g., 45 hours)**
  - 10 weeks into the course

- **Present learning outcomes by students to the site and faculty (PowerPoint talk, Capstone paper)**
  - 14 weeks into the course

- **Have the site supervisor provide feedback at the end of the SL hours (e.g., 90 hours)**
  - 16 weeks into the course

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Phase II: Planning/Implementation Issues to Cover with SL Supervisors

- Collaborate on ideas between both sites and students to finalize five or more site-related goals to be accomplished in a “learning contract”*

*COVID-19 Challenge: Clear and frequent communication between all stakeholders in this process is critical to finalizing these goals for the 90 hours of SL work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, online communication creates potential challenges for site coordinators faced with other “transition” tasks. Reminders are needed to supervisors to integrate interns into virtual site processes (e.g., administrative meetings) that would have been more readily accessible onsite.
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Phase II: Planning/Implementation Issues to Cover with SL Supervisors, continued

• Supervise interns and provide feedback of their site-related work at both midterm (about 45 hours) and final completion of SL hours (about 90 hours)*

*COVID-19 Challenge: The opportunities for ongoing supervision by site supervisors have become more challenging as interns’ work is primarily remote at this time. Typically, during COVID-19, virtual meetings tend to be less frequent than face-to-face onsite meetings for site supervisor’s mentoring and performance feedback to interns. “Structure” in the training process is needed through weekly virtual meetings with faculty, interns, and site supervisors.
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Phase II: Planning/Implementation Issues to Cover with SL Students

• Maintain ongoing contact with the site supervisor(s) and site participants (e.g., older ELL students at a community center) during the accomplishment of site-related work and seek ongoing feedback for optimal learning and professional development*

*COVID-19 Challenge: Students’ express frequent challenges in maintaining communication “channels” with site supervisors, and determining optimal methods of communication (e.g., texting or email). This issue of communication also extends to working with site participants and their associated resources (e.g., having computer tablets for continuing care residents).
Examples of ongoing online and remote SL student projects in response to COVID-19
Example SL Project #1 Under COVID-19: Online Activity

**SL Site:** Community center teaching adult/older adult English Language Learners (ELL) students

**SL Project under COVID-19:** Change from face-to-face to fully online ELL instructional curriculum for diverse adult/older adult learners

✓ Attend virtual meetings with staff, teachers, and adult/older adult learners (e.g., brainstorm how to conduct classroom sessions online with older learners who may have limited technology background/resources)

✓ Research supplemental learning content based on andragogical teaching principles and online instruction guidelines for ELL students

✓ Work on ELL distance learning project
  ○ Create adult learning curriculum
  ○ Tape online lessons
  ○ Conduct one-on-one online tutoring
Example SL Project #2 Under COVID-19: Remote Activity

**SL Site**: Multi-level memory care facility

**SL Project Under COVID-19**: Change to remote activity of creating and implementing multisensory reminiscence kits for memory-care residents

- Conduct interest surveys of residents in collaboration with staff (e.g., gardening, cooking, sewing, and nature/beach “themes”)
- Incorporate stimuli for each of the senses in order to both elicit recollection of past experiences and engage activity responses
- Create guidelines of how to use the kits for both staff and residents
- Develop theme-related “content” kits (e.g., pictures, items, music CD)
- Administer a post-activity survey to staff and residents to determine its effectiveness for different levels of memory functioning
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Lessons Learned in Conducting SL Training Under COVID-19

✓ Service learning requires a tailored plan of **adaptive goals** for sites, site participants (e.g., residents at a continuing care facility), faculty, and interns with many different situational factors to consider.

✓ All “stakeholders” need to deal with **situational ambiguity** as the training process is “fluid” in nature during changing social conditions with COVID-19. Ongoing communication is critical to this process.

✓ **Multi-approach technology usage** is important to many aspects of ongoing communication and site-related engagement with faculty, site supervisors, interns, and site participants.

✓ Thinking “outside the box” is necessary for interns, faculty, site supervisors, and service participants, encouraging **proactive and solution-oriented attitudes and behaviors** among all involved who may have anticipated a more traditional training experience before COVID-19.
Coming this Summer ....

Summer Teaching Institute: “A Discussion of Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Gerontology”
- planning on late July but a date has not yet been established.

Watch for details in the AGHE Connect Community, Open Forum and Email