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## Service Learning in the Time of COVID-19

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# Service Learning in the Time of COVID-19

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## Introduction

This essay describes a collaborative service-learning project in which psychology and speech-language pathology undergraduate students, along with special education graduate students, completed developmental screenings as part of their training in providing effective services to children. Universal developmental screening is an important tool in the early identification of developmental delays in young children and is increasingly incorporated into early childhood education. However, limited resources make it difficult for educators to routinely screen all young children in their care. Our students were able to meet this need for two local childcare centers by conducting developmental screenings in transdisciplinary groups.

Components of this project also included a focus on the development of professional dispositions and civic engagement. Students maintained reflective journals and responded to prompts that aligned with components of the project before, during, and after the screening transpired. Students also completed a final project that contained a written component and

oral presentation of a selected child in case study form. Although the final assignments varied between the three courses, the basic expectations of the written and oral assignments remained consistent from professor to professor.

## Program Description Prior to COVID-19

This project was conceptualized in 2014 as a joint initiative between inter-related courses and disciplines to encourage transdisciplinary collaboration at the pre-service level. Each course included a service-learning assignment or designation, requiring students to complete a minimum of ten hours of service related to their discipline within the communities surrounding our urban-engaged campus. Prior to COVID-19, this project organically evolved and expanded each year in direct response to student and stakeholder feedback.

The project entailed forming trans-disciplinary groups, with a graduate special education student acting as a peer mentor to the psychology and speech-language pathology undergraduate students. Students were trained in

the implementation of a universal, early childhood developmental screening, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), and used this screening to assess young children who attended two different childcare centers. One childcare center was located on our campus, serving children of our student body, staff, and faculty. The second childcare center was subsidized by community corporations to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty, homelessness, and childhood trauma. The parents of these children experienced substance abuse issues, mental health disorders, or incarceration.

Although the essential nature of this project has remained constant, each year professors place additional focus on one element of the project that would be studied in greater detail based on student feedback. For example, in reviewing comments from a post-survey conducted after the first cohort of students completed this project, students indicated that although the training provided was meaningful, it would be helpful to witness the administration of an actual screening. Taking that feedback to heart, we extensively searched for training videos and found none. Hence, we added a component to the project requiring each group of students to create a video of their ASQ administration to a child. Parental consents were obtained and confidentiality was maintained. Students created a script and voiceover narration, talking us through the screening implementation process. Over thirty training videos were created as a result of this assignment.

## Changes Made Due to COVID-19

Originally, the project required students to engage in face-to-face interaction with peers and onsite personnel; in-person planning meetings with groupmates; and physical interactions with young children during the screening process. Transdisciplinary groups were scheduled to complete screenings from February through April. We were faced with the realities of COVID19 in mid-March. Our public institution is part of a state-run system. On Wednesday, March 11, 2020, the Governor announced that our school's spring break would commence a week earlier than scheduled. Students were instructed to leave for break and not physically return, unless our dormitories were their only housing option. Post-break, classes traditionally held in-person were immediately transitioned to a distance-learning format. The governor's announcement was made 72 hours before the break commenced.

At that time, depending upon the frequency of class meetings, some professors were able to see their students for one final class. Others not at all. The student break was also extended from one week to two to allow faculty an extra seven days to transition to remote instruction. For all intents and purposes, spring break was nonexistent for faculty as we scrambled to convert content to a distance learning format.

To accommodate our students who had not yet completed the screening projects, we designed a meaningful alternate for project for those remaining students.

We discussed various options, including asking students to screen a child within their family or circle of friends. However, as social distancing regulations became more stringent, this option did not prove prudent or practical. We were also sensitive to the trauma our students were likely experiencing and wanted to ensure that modifications to the assignment met our educational goals without providing unnecessary stress for our students. After much deliberation, we remembered the numerous videos we asked our students to create several years before. We determined that the assignment for our remaining students could be converted to utilize many of our unused training videos. Essentially, we would ask the current students to select one child ASQ screening and complete the scoring protocols during the viewing process. Although this modification meant that students were no longer meeting a community need, they still had the opportunity to learn critical developmental screening skills. We reviewed our original final assignment and realized that many questions posed were still relevant to all our students, whether they screened a child in-person or by video proxy.

We revisited each video in painstaking detail, selecting those that were clear and illustrative, but still required our current students to observe child behavior carefully to answer the ASQ. We also wanted to mirror the screening experience as closely as possible. Therefore, we intentionally selected videos that represented children from diverse backgrounds as well as a variety of ages.

## **Challenges Faced or Problem-solving Techniques Employed**

We faced additional challenges resulting from our modified assignment. This assignment is complex and has multiple layers. We first needed to examine the four reflective journal entry questions originally asked. These prompts were to be answered at pre-determined points in time: pre-training, post-training, pre-screening, and post-screening. We easily ascertained that the first two entries could remain intact. We also determined that the questions we had posed prescreening could also be maintained. We did, however, have to create a new set of reflective journal entries for the students completing the modified assignment, which resulted in a modified version of our post-training questions. Our focus this year centered on professional conduct. For the students who completed the training in-person, we asked them to critique their own professional dispositions in a self-reflective exercise. For the students who completed the modified version of the post-screening questions, we asked them to critique the professional behaviors of the ASQ screeners observed in the training videos. Using those responses as a catalyst, we then asked them to reflect upon their own behaviors in similar professional situations. We encouraged them to consider how modification of their own behavior, as a result of what they learned from observing others, could result in-personal growth or the attainment of career goals.

An additional challenge centered on the post-assignment survey queries. We reviewed the existing questions with care, realizing many of them were relevant to all students. However, there were several

questions not applicable to the students completing the modified assignment. We added a section of survey questions pertaining only to the modified assignment. The electronic survey tool utilized allowed us to disaggregate the responses from the two groups of students, providing a rich and comprehensive study in contrast of experiences and perspective.

Lastly, we each adjusted our verbal case study presentation accordingly to reflect the two types of assessment experienced by our students. These oral presentations were delivered remotely through video conferencing which afforded each of us the opportunity to debrief with our students in real time and respond to their individual reports.

### Looking Ahead

As part of ongoing data collection, we examined items directly pertaining to the modified assignment. Quantitative analyses indicated that students believed they gained critical skills. Furthermore, those who completed the original assignment (n=35) did not significantly differ from students who completed the alternative assignment (n=20) on their perceptions of the importance of transdisciplinary practices and developmental screening, the development of professional dispositions, or their interest in working with young children and making a positive contribution to the community (all ps >.10).

Qualitative analyses identified three areas students missed by completing the modified assignment: flexibility, communication, and collaboration. These are representative comments for each three areas:

### Flexibility

- *"If I had been able to complete the original service-learning project, I would have had to rely on my true observations. Watching a video allows me to replay and also sit in the comfort of my own home. This was a disadvantage."*

- *"I just feel as if I missed the complete experience of having to be creative when coming up with ways for the child to execute the tasks. I do not think I missed out on any skills, I just missed out on experiencing it."*

### Communication

- *"I think I would have gained more skill in areas like communication and teamwork in-person. I also would have been able to work with clients in the real world which would have been beneficial."*

### Collaboration

- *"I think I would have gained more collaborative skills if I was able to complete the original project. Since I was unable to work with an individual with a different major, I was unable to share my knowledge and unable to bear a different perspective based off of their knowledge in a different area."*

However, overall, students in all disciplines indicated an understanding that, in these unprecedented times, faculty created an assignment that was valuable:

- *"I'm not quite sure [how this could have been improved]. It was probably difficult coming up with an alternative assignment!"*

- *"I think how the project was presented online worked out well. It was very straightforward and easy to complete and follow through."*

## **Conclusion**

In retrospect, we were proud that we were able to salvage this assignment given the circumstances. Given the integral components of the assignment such as collaboration, child interaction, demonstration of appropriate behavior in a professional setting, and service provision to the community, this was an exceptionally challenging student experience to modify. However, we feel we were able to maintain the assignment's integrity while remaining sensitive to our students' additional commitments, academic or otherwise, and judiciously modify the assignment to fully consider their emotional well-being and anxiety levels.

Institution-wide, we routinely assess our students for their perspective of the semester upon completion. Due to COVID-19, we added questions to our survey inquiring if students felt their personal motivation or desire to complete their coursework was compromised in any way due to remote learning. We also asked them if they experienced feelings of stress or anxiety in relation to meeting course obligations or completing practicum or service-learning requirements. Although we do not have the results of these surveys at this moment, we are reassured that we are asking the right questions. Our mental health services on campus continue to provide teletherapy services to all students and our academic support services remained active, virtually, throughout the pandemic.

We share in the hope that, as a campus, state, or country, we will never experience another period like the spring semester of 2020. However, the silver lining of the COVID-19 experience is that faculty and students in our institution demonstrated resiliency, perseverance, and innovation. ■