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Pamela D. Hall
Barry University, PHall@barry.edu

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Reflection and COVID-19: How Students and a Professor Made the Best of Remote Education in a Service-Learning Capstone Course

PAMELA D. HALL

Barry University

Introduction

This paper will provide a critical reflection of one professor's response to the Pandemic of 2020 and its impact on her service-learning course. The paper will discuss the changes that were made by the professor once the course format changed to remote education. Throughout, comments and reflections from the students as it applies to the assignments they had to complete remotely will be provided, and challenges that both the professor and students overcame will be discussed, followed by a description of takeaways that were gain from this experience. The paper will end with a message of hope for college professors who do community-engaged scholarship amid uncertainty about what future semesters will look like for higher education institutions.

Description of Course Prior to COVID-19

When we received the official word from our university that we were going remote, I thought about the impact of this necessary change on my service-learning course. I was concerned

about the students in my course and, more importantly, the children my students' children at a Head Start site. My service-learning course was a capstone experience for senior psychology majors. My students were charged with two major activities to complete at a Head Start center that served children of Haitian descent. One was a reading activity that focused on improving the children's racial identity and socio-emotional development, ages 3-5. The other was a community-based research project whereby the students were charged with collecting pre and post-test data. The project was a replication of the Clark & Clark (1950) doll study where the children would choose between black and white dolls by answering the following questions: a) which doll is the prettiest?; b) which doll is the good doll?; c) which doll is the bad doll?; and d) which doll would you like to play with (female), or do you like best (male)?

After the pre-test data was collected, the reading program began. The program consisted of reading a series of books to the children related to develop-

ing a positive self-concept, racial identity development, emotional regulation, and positive social interactions with their peers. By the time the official word came that the university was going remote, my capstone students had collected the pre-test and read five books to the children.

Changes Made Due to COVID-19

At the heart of service learning is critical reflection. As Eyler and Giles (1999) state, the hyphen sometimes used between service and learning represents reflection. This hyphen allows the students to tie the experience gained in the community with their academic coursework. Once the course went remote, it was imperative to create critical reflection activities that allowed students to make this connection between the service they had done to date with their academic coursework.

One exercise that was easy to complete through videoconferencing was a song reflection.

Students chose and played a song that addressed the following: a) What similarities do you perceive between you and the people you are serving?, b) What do you think a typical day is like for the people you serve?, and c) How did the children's responses during the doll study impact thoughts about how race/racism affects the children?

Furco et al. (2016) note that service learning benefits students in multiple areas such as academic learning and educational success; personal development (e.g., self-esteem, empowerment); civic development (e.g., citizenship, civic capacity); sociocultural develop-

ment and interpersonal development; ethical/ moral development; and career awareness and preparation. Their song presentations demonstrated personal, sociocultural, and ethical development as well as academic learning. They used course content to justify their answers during the song reflection. These benefits were also evident in another critical reflection activity they complete called "A letter to myself."

At the beginning of the course, students wrote a letter to themselves, and at the end of the course, they reflected on the letter. They were asked how going remote because of the pandemic impacted them and their ability to complete the service-learning course. The responses can be characterized as follows: a) students reflection coincided with the benefits of service-learning, b) students

were disappointed that they could not strengthen the bond that was developing between themselves and the children,

and d) students were concerned about the safety and well-being of the children and their families. Below are examples of these reflections from the assignment.

"The Plague of 2020 has definitely impacted my ability to complete my service-learning because our kids looked forward to seeing us each week." (female, C.J.).

"Was not able to complete data collection, analyzed results and present at department's research forum. Was not able to maximize benefits of service-learning (e.g., application of psychology principles, personal growth, and social responsibility)." (male, S.E.).

"Upon going remote, the university was wise to provide various trainings for faculty and students immediately."

"I am worried about the children in Mrs. R's and Ms. E's class because they may not be receiving education, childcare, and nutrition that Head Start provided them." (female, A.L.)

"I am disappointed I couldn't continue working with the children due to the virus. I believe I was making progress with the children who needed the most attention." (female, A.P.)

"Honestly I am really upset about the toll that this pandemic has taken. It has shut down the world and taken countless lives, it really impeded on my ability to fully experience this class." (female, R.B.)

Challenges Faced or Problem-solving Techniques Employed

When I first started teaching remotely, the biggest problem I confronted was the technology. It seemed the whole world was on the web and was using virtual conferencing, which seemed to overload the system. In a few instances, we were not able to get the audio or the video to work. We had to be creative when students did their song presentations. For instance, on two of the presentation days, I could not share the screen and play the song. So, I used my handy Alexa Echo. I said, "Alexa, play..." Then I turned the volume up loud enough for everyone to hear. We made it work.

Upon going remote, the university was wise to provide various trainings for faculty and students immediately. This was my first time teaching online. Now my technophobia has been reduced immensely. I am presently teaching a summer course online and feel confident I will be able to do so this fall, if necessary. I am coming up with creative

activities that students can complete remotely this fall in my service-learning course while working virtually with our community partners. Below is one such activity that was inspired by a reaction from a student in the course. This reaction gave me an idea about a final assignment that I will continue to utilize in this course post-pandemic.

"Going remote suddenly interrupted us, and we were not allowed to say good-bye to the children." (female, R.A.)

The abovementioned response inspired me to create an assignment to allow my students to say goodbye to the children. The students paired up and created a video whereby they read a book to the children, said their good-byes and explained to the children why they could not be there in person. The Head Start program had a YouTube channel to share the videos with the children and families. This reduced some of the despair the students felt about not saying goodbye to the children. Many of them were glad they were able to end the project with this assignment.

Looking Ahead

As a mental health professional and educator, my students' well-being is always at the forefront of my teaching. Once the course went remote, some students did not show up virtually or turned in assignments. I was able to reach them via email or phone to set up a virtual meeting. During the meetings, I encourage them to finish the semester and checked on their well-being. As many of the students voiced concern about the Head Start children, I was concerned about them and their families. This was particularly true when I

read some of their response from the “A Letter to Myself” assignment. One student stated that “COVID-19 affected me mentally and made it difficult to adjust to online school.” Another student said, “Since I’m home all the time, I’ve developed poor sleeping habits lost family members from COVID-19. This made me aware that I had to be more compassionate and understanding when students missed class or assignments. Like so many in the country, I was pleased that our university went to a CR/NC grading system for the semester.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is leaving a great deal of angst in higher education. Angst with regards to the financial burden that it is causing many students and their families. Angst with regards to what the fall semester will look like for the university. One silver lining I have noticed from this is people are not afraid to show their vulnerability. I think this connects people in ways that we need to be connected since we cannot come together for the human touch. The human condition is what connects us, and if we did not have virtual technology to connect, many people would be worse off mentally. Once we went remote, I began to do check-ins with the students and end each class with 5-minute meditations. It actually brought tears to my eyes when I read their comments in the chatbox. Comments such as, “Thank you, Dr. H., we really needed that.” I will continue to utilize meditation with my students, whether we are remote or face to face in the fall. I realize they, who are mostly first-generation college students, were going through a great deal before COVID-19, and now this pressure has been accentuated. Upon reflection, over these past months,

I have realized that my student needed love and compassion then, and they will need so much more as they deal with the posttraumatic stress of COVID-19. ■

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