

Community Engagement Enhancing Creative Arts Education in a Primary School Setting

*Community engagement 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. Community engagement in this context was used to give 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. 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 This paper seeks to answer the question, ‘What changes can occur through university students being involved in community engagement within the primary school situation?’ To answer this question, it examines a community engagement project that involved 13 undergraduate creative arts students who were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of arts-based projects with a range of teachers and classes. The outcomes suggest that adding the fourth component of **change** to McCarthy’s (2003) three basic, interdependent components of service learning of experience, reflection and knowledge could be considered.*

Introduction

Community Engagement, or academic service learning, seeks to link university students with community agencies to provide mutually beneficial experiences, knowledge and outcomes, guided by reflection, (McCarthy, 2003). As the university students are

involved in community engagement 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, or community engagement, 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.

As students engage in service learning or community engagement, 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’s model (2003) is based on the thesis that students gain both positive and negative experiences through their involvement with community agencies, each other, their lecturer and the larger community. They bring their knowledge from past experiences to their community engagements, and also gain knowledge from their participation in, and the processes of, the service learning experiences. As they reflect on these, they actively engage with their thoughts, feelings and actions and through this, put their experiences into context, making connections with their knowledge and their experiences. This case study seeks to suggest a fourth aspect of community engagement, that of change. As students reflect on their experiences and knowledge, this often gives them the impetus to bring about change in their personal and professional lives, as well as within the community agency in

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which they are working. 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.

Aims of the *MMADD about the arts* project

This paper seeks to answer the question, *What changes can occur through university students being involved in community engagement within the school situation?* To answer this question, it examines an Academic Service Learning project that involved 13 undergraduate students who were placed in a primary school to work on a variety of creative arts-based projects.

Community engagement in this context aimed 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, (Swick, 2001). The projects also aimed at helping them gain **knowledge** about teaching strategies, pedagogy, behaviour management and subject content within the creative arts (Dudderar, D. & Stover, L., 2003) 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, (McCarthy, 2003).

Context and Participants

The school

The school involved in this service learning project 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.

The students

The thirteen students who undertook the creative arts community service unit had a strong creative arts background and were enrolled in undergraduate degrees, planning to enrol on the Bachelor of Teaching postgraduate course on graduation.

Methodology

As part of a case study approach the students completed surveys, reflections and assignments, in order to ascertain what learning was occurring within the *MMADD about the Arts* project (M = Music, M = Media, A = Art, D = Dance, D = Drama), and the students took the role of participant-observers. In the introductory on-campus session, 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 the school setting, and were involved in one or more Creative Arts projects. They regularly 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 practising, 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 allowed them to develop a synthesis of their learning throughout the unit as they articulated their own philosophy of teaching.

MMADD about the Arts: Experiences

McCarthy (2003) states 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 experiential workshops relating to creative arts education. A questionnaire completed by 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 projects included working with teachers in their classrooms in one or more of the art forms, organising an art exhibition in the local community, and running arts workshops in an After School Arts Program.

MMADD about the Arts: Knowledge

As part of the introductory on-campus sessions, the students learned through their set text, lectures and workshops about 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.

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 a culminating synthesis of their learning experiences, students were required to reflect on the following, based on their previous 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, (Dudderar, 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, and brought about both personal and professional changes.

Changes in 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 the changes in their personal and professional life as a result of participating in this unit. Part of this involved reflecting on their development and learning throughout the unit, which included a recognition of the personal and professional changes they had made as a result of this experience. They also indicated 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.

Change in classroom practice 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 actively engaging with them in their classes; these included that they changed their attitude and practices in relation to the arts, 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.

Changes in children's experiences and development

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 changed and developed academically, emotionally, socially and artistically as a result of being involved in the creative arts learning experiences provided by the program. Students noted that some of the children had changed and developed in the areas of academic achievement, respect for self and others, training for life and self-expression.

Outcomes for the school community

Community engagement 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.

Challenges and changes

Although there were very few negative comments about the community engagement 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 lecturer 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, changes which addressed these issues were implemented.

Conclusion

The Creative Arts Community Engagement 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 how much they had changed, both personally and professionally, in that 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.

These outcomes suggest that adding the fourth component of **change** to McCarthy's (2003) three basic, interdependent components of service learning of experience, reflection and knowledge should be considered. As students, teachers and children were involved in the service learning projects, clear evidence of change was perceived in each of the participant groups.

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