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Local community as a platform for students learning

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the issue of how to involve local communities in students' learning/teaching process. The author discusses attempts undertaken by the teacher training university in Lithuania to activate local community members and institutions in order to create a local community as a platform for students learning. The first part of the paper analyses the theoretical concept of the 'sense of community', following this a piloted educational strategy, based on Service Learning methodology and with strong involvement of university students and members of the community, is presented. And finally, empirical data from the case study is discussed and some conclusions are proposed on the effectiveness of developing strategies for building local communities as a platform for students learning.

Keywords: *local community, sense of community, learning/teaching process*

Introduction

Most researchers (Fraser and Dutta, 2008; Castells, 2001; Bauman, 2000, 2007; Putnam, 1994) dealing with developments of contemporary societies and discussing the ways how to overcome challenges of globalisation point out the importance of 'making stronger communities', 'educating for a sense of community', etc. Some educationalists (eg Smith, 2001) point out that a sense of community is one of the most important aims of education, involving the cultivation of social networks, and the associated concern with reciprocity, trust and tolerance, etc..

The Lithuanian educational community is in strong need to look for new ways and directions, new learning/teaching strategies and methodologies in educating for a 'sense of community' of students at secondary and university level. To this end, Service Learning is being adapted into a Lithuanian sociocultural context and has started to be implemented in some national universities.

The major aims of this paper are to show how the local community can be used as a platform for students learning.

1. To present some theoretical understandings of the concept 'sense of community' and Service Learning methodology in educational settings.
2. To present and analyse some longitudinal research data on the effectiveness of Service Learning in educating for a sense of community.

Methods of research involved a survey, observations of students cooperative activities in the local community; focus groups with members of local communities, students, and university teachers.

1. 'Sense of community' concept in educational settings

Psychological perspective of the concept 'sense of community' is defined, analysed and structured in most powerful way in the theory of McMillan & Chavis (1986, 1990, 1996). According to the authors, members of community have a feeling that they belong to each other, that they are valued by each other, that they have common commitment to be together, etc. In this theory a 'sense of community' is composed of the following four elements with associated attributes:

1. Membership (boundaries, emotional safety, sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, common symbol system);
2. Influence (group members influence and motivate each other to participate in group activities);
3. Integration and fulfilment of needs, including those which are desired and valued (being together with the members and perceived similarity to others. Group cohesion and interaction);
4. Shared emotional connection (contact hypothesis, quality of interaction; shared event hypothesis; investment; effect of honour and humiliation on community members; spiritual bond).

Tayebiniki and Puttee (2012), analysing the development of a sense of community and the sense of isolation in the educational process, point out that, nowadays, when distance education is strongly on the agenda, it's very important to look for new learning/teaching strategies in order to educate for a stronger sense of community. Distance education programmes lack a sense of community because they do not necessarily promote togetherness among students. However, empirical research data (*ibid*) shows that notions of a sense of community and blended learning environments have reciprocal relations. In other words, high satisfaction of blended learning courses is attributed to its promotion of sense of community.

Tennent, Farrell, and Tale (2005), investigating relations between social capital and sense of community in schools, found that when social capital is strong in school, students have a stronger sense of community. At the same time it's important insight that family social capital is seen as a determinant of children's school success (Fulani, Watson and Leadwood, 2003) in the following ways:

- reciprocal obligations and expectations of one another held by family members (the obligation a child feels to work hard at school is reciprocated by parental obligations to provide a happy, secure environment);
- the potential for information available in social relations (family knowledge of who to contact for assistance or advice);
- the existence of effective norms and sanctions that encourage some forms of behaviour;
- the habits and dispositions evident in family members' individual and collective responses to problems (families can model self-efficacy when faced with difficult issues).

So, it's so important to build up stronger relations between families and neighbourhoods, schools and communities. Through the sharing of knowledge, guidance and values, schools can rebuild their students' diminishing social capital.

Another study which examined individual and school level predictors of a sense of community in school among adolescents was developed in Italy. The main results of this study was important for grounding the second step of our research:

'...provide potential areas for intervention to improve students' sense of community in schools. Individual sense of community in the school was related to factors within the individual, some of which may be amenable to change, but also to classroom and school characteristics, which are certainly amenable to change. At all three levels, democratic school climate was a moderate to strong predictor, which suggests that increasing student participation in making rules and organizing events, encouraging greater freedom of expression, and addressing the fairness of rules and teachers may increase school sense of community. Students with high sense of community may be more motivated to abide by the norms and values emphasised by the school' (Vieno, Perkins, Smith, Santinello, 2005, p. 338).

The results of studies presented above show how important education is in developing a sense of community from an early age.

2. Service Learning: dialogue between universities and communities

The grass roots for 'Service Learning' or 'Learning by Serving' could be found at John Dewey's (1997) philosophy 'learning by doing'. In another words, it's a learning process focused on the needs of the community. It has very strong citizenship approach because it's: a) a learning/teaching process focussed on the needs of civil society. It is like a bridge between learning/teaching process and service for the community; b) a learning/teaching process through responding to citizens' needs. Researchers (Eyler, Giles, 1999) pointed out that Service Learning have some common characteristics:

- activities are positive, meaningful and real to the participants;
- involve cooperative rather competitive experiences and thus promote skills associated with team work and citizenship;
- address complex problems in complex settings rather than simplifies problems in isolation;
- offer opportunities to engage in problem solving by requiring participants to gain knowledge of the specific context of their Service Learning activities and community challenges, rather than only to draw upon abstract knowledge such might come from textbooks. As a result, it offers powerful opportunities to acquire the skills of critical thinking.
- Promote deeper learning because the results are immediate and uncontrived. There are no 'right answers' in the back on the book. As a consequence of this immediacy of experiences, Service Learning is more likely to be personally meaningful to participants and to generate emotional consequences, to challenge values as well as ideas and hence to support social, emotional and cognitive learning and development.

Moreover, each case of implementing the methodology has to have in mind four basic principles:

1. Engagement (does an activity meet public goods, how do we know this, etc.)
2. Reflection (is a mechanism to encourage students to link their teaching to other members of community)
3. Reciprocity (has an every individual, organisation involved in the process functions as a teacher and as a learner).
4. Public dissemination of the ideas and solutions (are problems and activities presented in public).

Heffernan (2011, p. 3-4) identifies models of Service Learning for implementation into curriculum according educational culture:

- 'Pure' Service Learning Model. According to this model, students during courses not only go out of university into the community to serve, but also have, as their intellectual core, the idea of service to communities by students, volunteers, or engaged citizens. They are not typically lodged in any one discipline.
- Discipline Based Service Learning Model. In this model students are expected to have a presence in the community throughout the semester and reflect on their experiences on a regular basis using course content as a basis for their analysis and understanding.

- **Problem Based Service Learning Model.** According to this model, students or groups of students respond to the community much as ‘consultants’ working for a ‘client.’ It is presumed that the students will have some knowledge they can draw upon to make some recommendations to the community or to develop a solution.
- **Capstone Courses Model.** These courses are generally designed for majors and minors in a given discipline. Students are asked to draw upon the knowledge they have obtained throughout their course work and combine it with relevant service work in the community with the goal of exploring some new topic or to synthesise their understanding of the discipline.
- **Service Internships Model.** According to this model, like traditional internships, students work more intensely than typical service - learning experiences with students working as much as 10 to 20 hours a week in a community setting. Unlike traditional internships, these internship programmes have regular and on-going reflective opportunities and focus on reciprocity – the community and the student benefit equally from the experience.
- **Undergraduate community based Action Research Model.** It is a relatively new approach gaining popularity, community-based action research is similar to an independent study option for the rare student who is highly experienced in community work. In this model students can work closely with faculty members and learn research methodology while continuing to serve as advocates for communities and the issues of importance to communities.

3. Learning by Serving – Lithuanian case study

The first attempts to implement Service Learning methodology into curriculum of Lithuanian Universities (*Mažeikis, 2008, p. 8*) was made in 2002-2003. University of Saurian ran the project ‘*University – Community Relations in Baltic*’, Vitiates Magnus University together with European partners initiated the project ‘*Service Learning: Dialogue Between Universities and Communities*’ in the frame of Leonardo ad Vinci programme (2004-2006). In 2006-2008 the project COOPERIES based on Service Learning methodology was run at Stimuli University again.

In the period of 2007 – 2009 teacher training university in Vilnius started to implement one of models - Discipline Based Service Learning Model - into its’ curriculum of study programme Social Pedagogy. The author shares her experiences working on this programme.

3.1 Some preparatory remarks before starting the Discipline Based Service Learning Model

During the third semester students of the study programme Social pedagogy have to study the curriculum subject 'Civil Society and participation' as an obligatory subject (2 hours/week). So it was decided by the Study Committee that this subject is the best opportunity in the curriculum for implementing a Service Learning methodology. As for preparation to teach we try to answer to some pedagogical questions using some of the ideas, suggested by K. Heffernan (2011, p. 5).

Theory: Do we approach our discipline from a particular theoretical perspective? How is that evidenced in their teaching? How would we reconcile and integrate Service Learning with that perspective?

Pedagogy: How would utilizing Service Learning enhance a student's learning experience in our course? What are 2-3 outcomes we think service could provide for students in the particular course? Does university value a particular mode of teaching? How would service-learning be perceived within that model?

Community Partnerships: What is the nature of university community partnerships at our university? Who at our university is doing community based work? What have been our own experiences with community work? Collaborative work? What would be the nature of a community partnership that could address the pedagogical goals of our course? What community sites do we feel would best be suited to meet those goals? How might our course goals intersect with the goals of the community organization?

Reflection: How would we define reflection in our disciplinary construct?

According the author, we have to have in mind that Discipline Based Service Learning Model is generally, more easy to defend intellectually, but the link between course content and community experience must be very explicit. But the more explicit the link, the more one risks limiting the types of appropriate community experiences. This can make the placement more time consuming for faculty, the logistics and monitoring more difficult and more frustrating.

As far as Service Learning is an educational methodology involving students in challenging tasks that requires the application of knowledge and skills, meets genuine community needs and provides systematic reflection on the experience. So the key elements of Service Learning is Preparation, Action, Reflection and Celebration.

3.2 Choosing the community

Choosing the community for Service Learning strategy is one of the most important tasks. Boyle-Baise (2002) suggest that it's meaningful to do Service Learning in multicultural communities. Because they provide good possibilities not only for students to develop their

intellectual and communicative skills but it supports stronger learning environments for members of communities as well.

For our case study *Aukštadvaris* multicultural community, situated in Vilnius Region, was chosen. There are about 1130 inhabitants with Lithuanian, Polish and Russian background. Contemporary there are about 148 citizens under age of 30. There are some political, social and educational institutions in this community: Secondary school, Educational Centre, Church, local medical point, local governmental and police offices, grocery shops, etc.

3.3 Process

Implementation process including students activities involved four elements:

1. Studying the community (cultural, political, social and economic contexts).
2. Researching issues related with youth violence, child abuse, consumer rights protection, environmental issues, etc.
3. Reflecting upon experiences on regular bases through the semester;
4. Returning back to the community at the end of the semester with suggested solutions for identified problems;

So, it's expected that students will construct their knowledge, deepen their understanding and develop civic values. Planning learning/teaching process was developed and structured into some steps:

First STEP: **preparation**

Students during the course 'Civil Society and Participation' at studied the history and culture of the community; learnt about the structure and functions of local institutions; analysed community social and economic problems reflected in mass media; looked for information on local elections; together with teacher developed questionnaire on predictable consumer problems in the community.

Second STEP: **action**

Students interviewed every person they met in public space during 2 hours. They found that everybody was faced with consumer problems; some of the respondents though did not identify these problems as such.

Third STEP: **reflection, studies, development of solutions, etc.**

On return to university students' reflected upon the situation in the community; searched for information about possible solutions; studied Laws; gathered best practices of solving such problems in other communities, countries; developed possible solutions for identified problems

Fourth STEP: **acting together with community members, serving for community**

After two weeks of studies at university, students returned to the community and organised small group meetings with community members and shared developed plans for problem solutions; motivated community members to apply for concrete institutions dealing with consumer rights protection; visited institutions together with members of community.

Fifth STEP: assessment

At the end of semester students achievements were assessed by prepared portfolios, developed reflections and essays.

3.4 Empirical research

Major goal of the small scale empirical research was to investigate how effective was the Service Learning strategy in developing sense of community of students.

Research methodology was based on the theoretical construct of the 'sense of Community' (McMillan & Chavis (1986, 1990, 1996) including 4 criteria: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, shared emotional connection.

We used methods for gathering empirical data: survey, observations of students cooperative activities in local community; focus groups with members of local communities, students, university teachers. All instruments (questionnaires, observation guidelines and questions for the focus groups) contained mentioned criteria.

We had 200 respondents filling in questionnaires. 3 focus groups were organised (6 members in each representing students, community members, local institutional officers). Two teacher's assistants did 5 observations of joint activities (students acting together with members of the community).

Conclusions

As far as it's a longitudinal study, we can share only some initial results and partly developed conclusions.

People (members of community) started to trust students more at the end of course. They were persuaded as to the importance of student' support in developing and channelling complaints to local institutions, and they expressed willingness to cooperate with the students again in the future. Social institutions became more active and more friendly in fulfilling the needs of members of the community. Students gained new knowledge with a deepened sense of social responsibility. Most of informants pointed out that they 'felt like they are influenced'. More than half of community members felt 'fulfilment of their needs'. Some expressed 'shared emotional connection'.

Finally, we conclude that:

1. The findings suggest that the Service Learning methodology helped students and community members to develop a sense of community.
2. Service Learning is an effective educational methodology for building the local community as a platform for students learning.

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