

Learning by Doing: Undergraduate Student Perceptions of a Family Life Education Service Learning Assignment

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ABSTRACT. This paper illuminates the utility of service learning in teaching family life education (FLE) methodology, discusses its challenges, and shares lessons learned using this approach. The assignment described here indicates that several major course objectives of a senior level capstone Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) course were met by completion of a FLE workshop assignment. Student reflections suggested that although the assignment was challenging, it helped them learn about FLE methodology, collaboration, and professionalism. Their reflections also illuminate areas where there is a need for additional scaffolding and for improvement in this type of assignment. Adaptations to traditional course formatting are suggested as a possible solution to the need for scaffolding during a large service learning assignment. Overall, results indicate service learning can be an important tool for preparing students for future professional roles.

Keywords: Service learning; family life education; undergraduate instruction

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Introduction

Service learning continues to gain popularity because it provides real-life, hands-on learning opportunities for Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) undergraduate students (Cottle, Boden, & Richards, 2017; Jaccoby, 2015). This approach also aligns with a recent call for more purposeful learning activities for preparing future HDFS professionals (Newman, 2017). Employers want applicants/employees with varied skills and competencies such as oral communication, ethical decision-making, interpersonal skills, teamwork, written communication, problem solving, intervention strategies, leadership, program evaluation, marketing, group facilitation, research/statistical skills, and curriculum development and implementation (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2017; Taylor, 2009). How can instructors help students develop skills and competencies related to family life education (FLE) methodology and related professional and ethical issues? What are students' perceptions of community-based learning approaches to teaching FLE methodology? This paper answers these questions using mixed method evaluation of a FLE service learning assignment.

Service Learning in Human Development and Family Sciences

Increasingly, learning opportunities involving volunteerism, field experience, service learning and internships are incorporated into HDFS courses, curricula, and campus initiatives (Newman, 2017; Taylor, Carroll, Ballard, Baugh, & Jorgensen, 2017). These active learning experiences involve community-based learning (CBL) or learning outside the classroom in partnership with community members or agencies (Mooney & Edwards, 2001; Ritblatt & Obegi, 2001). Pedagogically, CBL approaches rely on experience as the basis for learning (Jaccoby, 2015). Specifically, service learning is an expansion of volunteering or community service because of the focus on student reflection to meet learning outcomes (Felten & Clayton, 2011; Furco, 1996; Ritblatt & Obegi, 2001). The relationship is reciprocally beneficial because it balances student learning with meeting community needs. Moreover, service learning is appropriate for a discipline that is applied in nature and supported by several learning theories.

Theoretical support for using service learning as an effective pedagogical approach include Knowles' (1984) theory of adult learning or andragogy and Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning. Many undergraduate students are within the emerging adulthood stage of the lifespan and have developed a body of knowledge and experiences that can promote learning (Ambrose, Bridges, Lovett, DiPietro, & Norman, 2010). Knowles (1984) proposed that adults are more self-directed and interested in becoming more involved in planning and evaluation of their instruction. With growing maturity and development of a body of knowledge, adult learning also focuses more on problem solving than solely on content retention. Finally, adults are most interested in learning subjects with clear, immediate implications and relevance to their professional or personal lives. Thus, involving students in service learning engages them in applying concepts and developing professional skills while allowing personal reflection on their learning experience.

Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning provides a useful framework for understanding how experience leads to learning. It involves four components: 1) concrete experience; 2) observation of and reflection on that experience, 3) formation and synthesis of abstract concepts based upon reflection, and 4) active experimentation to test concepts in novel situations. A service learning assignment in FLE gives students the opportunity to apply course concepts and their existing knowledge during concrete experiences. Experiences are then followed by reflection on personal and professional issues.

Why is service learning particularly beneficial for HDFS students and HDFS departments? Due to the field's applied nature, students can benefit from more engaged practices as they begin their careers (Newman, 2017; Taylor & Ballard, 2012). Service learning is also considered by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) to be a "high-impact" practice (2007). As outlined by Kuh (2008), high-impact practices in education help develop relevant skills through formal application of course concepts to real-world learning opportunities. In high-impact practices, students invest time in meaningful tasks and build connections with peers, faculty, and the community. Students receive frequent feedback on their work and experiences can be applied to various settings (Kuh, 2008). Within a discipline focused on multiculturalism, engagement in high-impact community-based learning exposes students to complexity and diversity of individuals and families and promotes greater civic engagement (Hatcher, 2011). That is, it gives students access to intangible concepts and issues that are not readily available in the classroom.

Courses about FLE often focus on teaching students about the "art & science" of delivering FLE programs (Small & Kupisk, 2015). There is discussion of the balance between intangible facilitator characteristics used for engaging an audience along with the scientific foundation underlying high quality program implementation. Service learning can help students experience firsthand what is meant by the "art" of FLE while also gaining practical skills to research community needs, identify curricula/resources, and conduct brief evaluations. Various approaches to teaching about FLE include mock workshops, portfolios, FLE program proposals, and delivery of programming to community partners (Cottle et al., 2017; Tobias, 2017; VanLeeuwen, 2017; Vaterlaus & Asay, 2016). There is a considerable amount of scholarship that supports the use of experiential learning in FLE courses (e.g., Newman & Schmidt, 2017).

Previous studies of community-based experiential learning approaches to teaching FLE indicate positive outcomes for student development. In a study of an undergraduate FLE assignment, Vaterlaus and Asay (2016) found that teaching FLE was associated with students' learning collaboration skills, program planning, and implementation. After participating in a service-learning project, family studies undergraduate students report learning more about working in groups, leadership, and experience that improved empathy towards vulnerable populations. Students also report that the experience helped them apply course material to real-life experiences (Jacobson, Oravec, Falk, & Osteen, 2011).

Overall, service or experiential learning projects may be useful approaches to meeting objectives in HDFS courses because of the use of high impact practices (Kuh, 2008), which align well with the field's applied, practical nature. As service learning gains popularity in HDFS, continued evaluation work is needed for understanding students' experiences. The primary aim

of this paper is to allow student voices to illuminate benefits and challenges associated with this type of pedagogical approach within a senior level family life education course.

Course Background

The service learning assignment evaluated in this paper occurred in a senior-level course called Professional Practices in Human Development and Family Sciences (HDFS). Enrollment is typically between 10-15 students. The instructor is a Certified Family Life Educator with experience facilitating FLE workshops and undergraduate service learning courses. The assignment was designed to meet the following course objectives: 1) Demonstrate knowledge of FLE content areas and methodology; 2) Demonstrate and reflect on ethical and professional behavior; and 3) Demonstrate knowledge and skills related to professional practice in HDFS including prevention services for families and individuals across the lifespan. The assignment involved planning, implementing, and evaluating a medium dosage FLE workshop. A post-course survey administered to students and a qualitative review of final reflection papers provides information about the assignment's effectiveness in meeting these objectives and identifying students' perceptions of benefits and challenges associated with the assignment.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of a class of senior-level undergraduate students majoring in Family and Consumer Sciences with an emphasis in Human Development and Family Sciences at a small land-grant university in the Mountain West region of the United States. A total of ten female students whose mean age was 23 completed surveys and consented to having their reflection papers used for data analysis in this study. The class was 70% European American, 20% Latina/Hispanic, and 10% mixed racial background.

Procedure

The research protocol received Institutional Review Board approval and informed consent was obtained from all student participants. Informed consent and a description of the research project was given to students before they turned in final reflection papers. Students consented to completing surveys and having their final reflection papers used for the research project. Students were informed verbally and in the informed consent document that their participation was voluntary and there were no consequences for choosing not to participate.

Students completed the survey when the instructor was not present and returned surveys and consent forms in separate envelopes. Descriptive statistics were calculated using quantitative survey data.

To qualitatively analyze reflection papers, papers were read several times and thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes. Thematic analysis is beneficial because this analytic approach provides flexibility in application across various theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data set included final reflection papers written by students in response to 12 prompts. In identifying themes, deductive and inductive approaches were used to search for

meaningful patterns across reflection paper prompts and generally across the data set. The aim was to identify themes or patterns that captured important information related to this study's overall research questions. To enhance confidence and ensure validity of the qualitative results, member checks were conducted, participants received the results and an opportunity to share feedback. Member checks were conducted at a point when participants were no longer enrolled in a course with the instructor and after many students had graduated. At the time of member checks, students were reminded of the opportunity to withdraw their participation in the study. No participants chose to withdraw their survey/reflection papers.

Family Life Education Workshop Assignment. The assignment intended to give students hands-on experience planning, implementing, and evaluating a brief medium dosage FLE workshop. Medium dosage FLE typically offers detailed information in a one-time, brief educational setting such as a workshop or seminar (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). The class was divided into two groups of five students. Due to limitations in students' schedules, workshops were held during the regular class meeting time (12:10-3:00pm). Students offered workshops targeting the campus community. The following is a description of each graded assignment element. The full assignment description is available from the author.

First, students identified a need that existed in the campus community by brainstorming and reviewing research articles and data about the topic they were interested in. Groups selected mindfulness-based stress reduction and adult relationship education. With instructor collaboration, students selected reputable resources for workshop curricula and materials. Next, using the FLE methodology planning wheel (Clarke, 1998) as a guide, students wrote a formal proposal outlining 1) mission and guiding values, 2) needs addressed, 3) planned objectives, 4) implementation plans, and 5) post-session evaluation plan. Students also submitted a copy of their curriculum lessons at this stage. After receiving feedback on their workshop plan, students designed and distributed flyers to advertise the workshops.

Students then created post-session evaluations which included questions to gather qualitative and quantitative data related to the workshop topic, objectives, and overall facilitation quality. These evaluations included retrospective pre-post surveys (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000) to determine knowledge before and after the workshop. Workshops occurred on campus during the final two weeks of the semester. Participant recruitment occurred using email, flyers, and class announcements; each workshop was attended by seven and ten participants. During workshops, each student presented a segment of the lesson. Teaching methods included lecture, discussion, brainstorm, and interactive activities (e.g., mindfulness practice) and afterward, participants completed post-session evaluations. Following the workshops, the instructor entered evaluation data and provided basic statistics (e.g., means, percentages) and qualitative comments to workshop groups so that they could complete brief reports to present to the academic department. Finally, students completed peer and self-evaluations and wrote detailed reflection papers about their perceptions of the whole assignment. To understand effectiveness of the assignment and gain insight into student perceptions, the following research questions guided this study:

1) Did the FLE workshop assignment meet the outlined course objectives? 2) After completing this assignment, how did the students evaluate the work they did individually and in groups? 3) What were students' overall perceptions of the assignment?

Data Collection

Students completed post-course surveys about their impressions of the assignment and how well they thought the assignment met several course objectives by responding to eight items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not well at all; 5 = very well). This measure was created to match course objectives and had good reliability ($\alpha = .84$). Students also provided evaluations of the quality of individual and group work throughout the project. Students responded to 11 items about their individual work ($\alpha = .77$), and 9 items about their group's work ($\alpha = .80$). Students were prompted with "Please respond to each item by selecting how much you agree or disagree with each statement about your group/your work." Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). These individual and group evaluation survey items were developed after reviewing similar surveys (e.g., Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993) and customized to fit the service-learning assignment (e.g., including an item about using examples provided).

Written reflection is a commonly used method for understanding students' learning experiences and thoughts about service-learning experiences (Hatcher, 2011; Jacoby, 2015). In final reflection papers, students responded to twelve prompts encouraging reflection on multiple personal, professional, and assignment-specific topics. Examples of prompts include: "What professionalism and/or ethical issues emerged during this experience? How does this experience compare to a typical in-class presentation to your classmates and instructor? In what ways did you do well in this experience? What personal characteristics helped you do well? What was difficult for you? What personal characteristics contributed to the difficulties you experienced?"

To reduce biased responses, instructions emphasized that grades would be earned for thoroughness of responses rather than the nature of responses. That is, it was clearly stated that the nature of their opinions, negative or positive, would not impact their grade. This point was also repeated verbally to students in class.

Results

To answer the first research question, quantitative descriptive analyses were conducted (see Table 1). Course objectives that students reported were met best by the workshop assignment are related to demonstrating and reflecting on professional behavior and knowledge of FLE methodology. The lowest mean score was for reflecting on ethical principles in professional practices. Descriptive statistics of student evaluations of individual and group work are presented in Table 2. Students rated their individual work quite high with mean responses ranging from 4.20-4.80 on a five-point scale. The lowest-rated items are related to individual's inclusivity in communicating through email, providing constructive feedback to group members on all aspects of the assignment, and behaving professionally. Students rated their group work somewhat lower than their individual work, with mean scores ranging from 3.60 to

4.60 on a five-point scale. The highest rated item was “My group really cared about getting a good grade” ($M = 4.60$; $SD = .52$). The lowest rated items are related to using the provided examples/resources, incorporating feedback, and being inclusive in communicating with other group members.

Qualitative Analysis of Reflection Papers

To address the second research question, thematic analysis was used for understanding common emergent themes in responses to multiple prompts. Themes emerged from reflection papers related to professionalism in group work, the value of a real workshop versus a class presentation, connections to course concepts, practice of professional skills, and identification of individual growth areas and strengths. Across reflection paper prompts, several themes also emerged related to challenges of the assignment and areas for future improvement. The following is an overview of major themes that emerged within and across prompts. Student names are replaced with pseudonyms.

Comparison to a typical in-class presentation. In comparison to normal in-class presentations to a peer audience, students reported that presenting a workshop to strangers involved more pressure, responsibility, and an increased amount of preparation. Students commented that during traditional in-class presentations, the audience is forced to be there, can tune out the presenter, and the only thing at stake is a grade. There is a degree of familiarity with classmates and students present information related to what they learned together in class, so they are aware of their classmates’ baseline knowledge of a subject. During workshops, students were unaware of the participants’ baseline knowledge.

This was a new experience, but I found it more educational than a traditional in-class presentation. –Sarah, age 26

We know generally, what our classmates already know on a topic because we have shared the same courses. When it comes to strangers, we do not know. – Jennifer, age 22

Table 1. Student evaluation of how well the assignment met selected course objectives ($N = 10$)

Measured Course Objective	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Apply ethical principles in professional practice	3.40	.52
Reflect on ethical principles in professional practice	3.30	.82
Demonstrate knowledge of family life education content areas	4.00	.66
Demonstrate knowledge of family life education methodology	3.70	.67
Demonstrate professional behavior	4.10	1.10
Reflect on professional behavior	4.30	.67
Demonstrate <i>knowledge</i> related to professional practice in HDFS including prevention services for families and individuals across the lifespan	3.40	.70
Demonstrate <i>skills</i> related to professional practice in HDFS including prevention services for families and individuals across the lifespan	3.60	.70

Table 2. Self-reported evaluation of individual and group work (N = 10).

<i>Evaluation of individual work</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I upheld the commitments I made to my group members.	4.50	.52
I submitted all work by the agreed upon deadlines.	4.40	.51
I was inclusive in communicating with my group members (e.g., Copying everyone on emails, including all members in giving feedback, scheduling)	4.20	.91
I was active in group discussions and planning.	4.60	.69
I did my best work on all aspects of the assignment.	4.50	.52
I had high expectations for my group's work.	4.50	.70
I had high expectations for my own work.	4.80	.42
I provided constructive feedback on all aspects of the assignment.	4.20	.63
I behaved in a professional manner.	4.30	.48
I contributed as equally as possible to this assignment.	4.70	.48
I took responsibility for any mistakes I made.	4.80	.42
 <i>Evaluation of group work</i>	 <i>M</i>	 <i>SD</i>
My group valued the work I contributed.	4.20	.42
My group was open to my ideas and feedback.	4.50	.71
My group was cohesive and worked well together.	4.50	.52
My group took full advantage of all the examples and resources available to us.	3.60	.92
My group incorporated peer and instructor feedback into our work before we resubmitted work.	4.10	.73
My group asked questions or requested assistance from the instructor when needed.	4.30	.48
My group was inclusive in communicating with all group members (e.g., Copying everyone on emails, including all members in giving feedback, scheduling, etc.)	4.10	.99
My group took the assignment seriously.	4.40	.70
My group really cared about getting a good grade.	4.60	.52

Although students acknowledged there was more at stake and this assignment was a “bigger deal” than a traditional in-class presentation, many students expressed surprise and/or frustration about the workload. They found the assignment to involve more work, be more intense, complex, and stressful than they anticipated.

Was more challenging than I had originally planned – Millie, age 24

The amount of work that it entailed surprised me – Heather, age 22

More stressful and complicated than we were anticipating – Rachel, age 23

Although challenging, students generally described the workshop presentation as more professionally realistic and more educational than typical in-class presentations. In particular, students described their efforts to engage the audience, learn the content, and prepare for good time management during the presentations, which were much longer than their past in-class

presentations. There was greater focus on upholding their reputations by presenting material in an interactive, knowledgeable, and professional manner.

A workshop for the community puts my reputation on the line as well as the participant's time...the only thing on the line during a class presentation is my grade. – Michelle, age 22

I love to engage people in conversations, and although it is very different in a group setting I felt I did a decent job of facilitating a conversation with participants. It was important to me that participants felt comfortable with one another. – Sarah, age 26

Emergence of professional and/or ethical issues. The primary professional issues that emerged in reflections are related to the experience of working in groups. Group dynamics such as inclusivity, communication, and trust were paramount in their discussion of professional issues encountered throughout the semester. Furthermore, some students reflected on learning more about how to best balance assertiveness with being a supportive team member.

It's not like I didn't value communication before, because I definitely did, but after having a few episodes of almost crashing and burning during the semester because a lack of communication, I now see it as a top priority in professional situations. – Eve, age 21

Communication was probably our biggest professional issue that we experienced during this process. – Heather, age 22

Ensuring that something is done well does not make me bossy or controlling, but professional. I want to always present my best work; and although it can feel awkward, sometimes group projects require tactfully correcting others. – Sarah, age 26

Students reflected on differences in group member professionalism and performance, related specifically to work ethic, professional boundaries, timeliness, and work quality. Reflections indicated that these experiences provided important learning opportunities related to professional development.

What I learned the most was to be flexible and understanding that every person has his or her own set of expectations for themselves and that they will differ from the expectations that I have for myself. – Maddison, age 21

I need to work on my professionalism so that people can trust my work, and count on me as a member of their team. – Millie, age 24

These experiences, however, made the workshop more realistic to a professional setting because it is likely that this lack of communication/miscommunication will

happen later on and we will have to learn to handle it in our work setting. — Rachel, age 23

Although most students described their understanding of the importance of ethical decision-making, few provided specific examples of ethical dilemmas. The only ethical issues named were related to adapting a curricula and advertising the workshops.

Ethical decision-making was a concept that we had to deal with this assignment. For instance, one decision that we had to make was altering and changing the program. — Maddison, age 21

Hanging up flyers without getting permission first, may have been the only ethical issue I encountered. — Jennifer, age 22

Connection to course concepts. An essential aspect of service learning is to make connections with course concepts (Jacobson et al., 2011; Jaccoby, 2015). Students pointed out connections to topics covered in the Professional Practices course, other HDFS courses, and courses in other disciplines. Students named aspects of FLE methodology including outlining and following program objectives, evidence-based programming, the FLE planning wheel (Clarke, 1998), and program evaluation.

Overall, it was a good assignment to assign to cover the planning wheel with hands on experience. — Kara, age 21

The idea of having to create lessons or activities for strangers was scary at the beginning of the semester because we did not think we were qualified. Over time, the course taught us that we are qualified to facilitate a program and that helped our nerves. — Jennifer, age 22

Students noted connections to specific theories covered in HDFS coursework:

I think Kolb's theory was validated because the audience seemed to enjoy them and were more interested and engaged, judging by their involvement in during the workshop. — Eve, age 21

ABC-X stress model and trying to make sure that I look at other people's backgrounds and what is going on in their lives instead of just my own. — Rachel, age 23

Students also identified information they needed or instances of needing more guidance. For example, when commenting on completing the brief reports using statistics, students stated this was difficult because they lacked sufficient knowledge to understand and interpret statistics (i.e., means, t-tests, percentages). Students were not required to enter or analyze data gathered on post-session evaluations. Descriptive statistics and results of t-tests along with interpretations of mean differences were provided to students before they completed brief reports. Students were responsible for choosing statistics to report that aligned with their objectives or provided

important information to their audience of “stakeholders.” Their reflections highlight a mismatch in professor-student understanding of the assignment instructions.

Presenting the data from the survey proved to be difficult because many of us lacked the knowledge on how to interpret the statistical information. I have taken a statistics course, but I would not say that my knowledge of the topic was skilled enough to remember exactly what each of the values meant or how we got them.
— Rachel, age 23

It was difficult because we were not very prepared to read our own data results. – Jennifer, age 22

Develop or practice professional skills. There were mixed responses regarding whether students found the assignment helpful for developing certain professional skills. Most but not all students reflected on how the assignment helped them develop and/or practice skills relevant to a career in HDFS, such as teamwork, communication, marketing, program evaluation, and audience engagement.

I think this assignment helped me most with program evaluation. – Alicia, age 29

My skills with teamwork helped me in this assignment. I have learned that it is easier to lead by example rather than telling others what to do. – Kara, age 21

Others, however, reported that they did not gain or practice certain skills, either because they had already had opportunities to learn the skills or because they did not receive enough instruction to support development of certain skills. Research and oral communication were listed as skills that were least developed in this assignment.

As for professionalism and research, those skills have been pounded into me over and over, so I didn't really learn anything new or get a ton more valuable experience. – Eve, age 21

The skills that I developed the least were program evaluation and research. I think that I didn't develop these skills the best because there wasn't much direction and when I thought our group was on the right track we were not. – Maddison, age 21

Reflection on personal characteristics. Students identified how their personal characteristics either hindered or helped their performances in this group project throughout the semester. The experience appeared to help them identify and compare their work ethic and standards for their work with that of other students. Many described how their expectations and standards affected their experience doing the assignment. Specifically, students seemed to reflect on how their personal traits interacted with group dynamics.

I am very good at holding myself to a high standard and others so when they don't meet the standard I tend to not be as patient. This not only is something that I should work on in a work setting, but also in life. – Kara, age 21

I tend to get really concerned when I am uncertain about something and it caused me to panic a little bit and get frustrated at myself and my group. – Michelle, age 22

I needed to use better communication skills with all of my group members. – Alicia, age 29

Students also noted individual traits and skills that helped them make positive contributions to their group:

My characteristics that helped me with this experience are being driven, a team player, hard worker and good at managing my time. — Maddison, age 21

One way I performed well in this experience was working to keep the group together. I would try and be a member that reached out to everyone and tried to keep us all on the same page and working well together. – Millie, age 24

General evaluation of the workshop assignment. Students provided overall evaluations of their experiences implementing a workshop by describing positive and negative perceptions. Overall, students appeared to have ambiguous perceptions of the assignment. Many found it excessively stressful, particularly due to group dynamics and the need for detailed instruction on each element of the assignment. Others described multiple benefits because it was a new experience that pushed them outside their comfort zones to develop professional skills in a realistic or “real world” setting.

I am glad that I had this experience and parts of it will be helpful in my future career, but creating a workshop/evidence-based program and collecting data and demographics was unenjoyable and somewhat stressful. – Michelle, age 22

I have never created a program post-session evaluation before nor have I been through the process of creating a brief report, so that experience was very beneficial and challenging. –Jennifer, age 22

This assignment was useful because it required a variety of real-life skills. – Sarah, age 26

This workshop provided me with a glimpse into what it would actually be like to have to present a real workshop for a future career. – Rachel, age 23

Many of the students' reflections illustrated their enjoyment of engaging a real audience and observing outcomes of their efforts.

It was a rewarding experience getting to see the participants learning and applying concepts that we taught. – Heather, age 22

The thing that I liked most about this workshop was providing people with useful information that can not only better themselves, but their relationships as well. – Rachel, age 23

However, reflections also included negative evaluations of the workshop assignment. Many found the experience frustrating, intimidating, difficult, challenging, and stressful. Students described the semester-long experience as filled with nerves, fear, anxiety, pressure and group conflict.

Every aspect of the workshop leading up to the presentation was difficult. – Maddison, age 21

I was confident in my work and I missed the mark. Moving past the failure was very hard for me and hard for my group. They lost trust in my ability because of that assignment and I never felt like a fully got it back. It was very difficult to be looked down on for months, and this was something I found to be very stressful. – Millie, age 24

Additional themes. The following themes emerged across prompted responses and included issues related to group work, lack of technological skills, issues with assignment logistics, and timing of the assignment. As can be expected with any new experience, students described multiple challenges. Students commented on the difficulty of being productive in group meetings, struggles to find common meeting times, and communication problems among group members. Students suggested having more class time and even a lab class corresponding with the course to allow for more structured work time.

The other part I liked the least was how much time it took away from my other studies because of the dedication that had to be put into this project. – Alicia, age 29

I believe it would have been helpful to spend time in class on the workshop in the beginning, so that everyone would have had more clarification with what was expected. – Kara, age 21

An unexpected issue became evident across the semester and was confirmed in reflections: students were not confident or skilled enough in the technology needed to complete assignment elements.

One huge aspect that was difficult for me was my lack of knowledge with technology. – Heather, age 22

Creating the survey was really difficult for me. I am not used to making tables or dealing with that type of formatting. – Michelle, age 22

A theme related to the timing of the assignment emerged. Since this was completed in the fall semester of their senior year, students reflected on how it was timed appropriately.

By senior year of college, students are accustomed to turning in their work to their professors, and it was a nice change to have a task that was going to be presented to the public. – Eve, age 21

This was a very good learning experience and was implemented at the right time of our senior year. – Kara, age 21

Discussion

As experiential modes of learning gain popularity, it is imperative to understand how well these efforts meet objectives of HDFS courses. Understanding the utility of these assignments involves listening to student voices to gauge their perceptions of such assignments. The assignment described in this paper indicates that several major objectives of a senior level capstone HDFS course were satisfied by completion of a FLE workshop assignment. Self-reported evaluations of individual and group work provide insights into areas where students thought they did well and where there needed to be improvement. Reflections indicated that although the assignment was challenging, it helped students learn about FLE methodology, collaboration, and professionalism. Their reflections also illuminate areas where additional scaffolding is needed. Adaptations to traditional course formatting can be a possible solution to the need for scaffolding during an intensive service learning assignment.

Overall Evaluation of the Assignment

In general, several course objectives in an FLE course can be met by using a high-impact experiential learning project. For instance, descriptive statistics indicated that students demonstrated and reflected on professional behavior and improved their knowledge of FLE methodology. Along with the challenges of a novel assignment, group processes led to difficulties. Similar to other research on group work (e.g., Campion et al., 1993), students rated their group work somewhat lower than their individual work. Specifically, students reported relatively lower scores on their group using examples or resources, communicating inclusively, providing and incorporating constructive feedback, and behaving professionally. A key aspect of high impact practices involves providing frequent feedback on student work (Kuh, 2008) and is described as an essential element of FLE service learning projects (Newman & Schmitt, 2017). These results indicate that students may need more direct instruction, monitoring, and support to incorporate feedback into their work. That is, rather than simply providing feedback, instructors can have clear expectations about incorporating feedback, possibly linked to scoring/grading of final assignments. According to Knowles' (1984) theory of adult learning, many young adults aim to apply knowledge to real-world situations with clear implications for their professional or personal lives. Quantitative self and group evaluations appear to align with some of the themes in student reflection papers.

From reflection papers, several themes emerged. Similar to a meta-analysis of service learning by Celio, Durlak, and Dymnicki (2011), students described social issues such as communication, collaboration, and group dynamics. Reflection papers focused primarily on professional issues such as difficulties that arose when work ethic, communication, and timeliness differed among group members. Many noted that these challenges are common in the real world, so it was helpful to learn how to resolve professional issues while still a student.

Students found the workshop assignment to be more work-intensive and challenging than the traditional in-class presentations were. They focused on being knowledgeable and professional and identified unique challenges of presenting to unknown audiences. Reflections suggest the assignment provided opportunities for problem solving, adapting to change, and practicing professional communication. These are valuable skills regardless of professional setting. The workshop assignment was a novel experience, yet students identified connections with previous experiences, indicating they likely drew upon existing knowledge/skills to help complete the assignment. Students also made connections between course concepts and the workshop assignment, particularly related to FLE methodology. Students reported that the workshop helped connect course concepts to real life settings, a common theme in experiential learning scholarship (e.g., Jacobson et al., 2011; Kolb, 1984) and a major aim of high impact educational practices (Kuh, 2008). This supports the use of more high-impact assignments with students who are advanced in their educations because they may have more professional and academic experiences on which to build (Ambrose et al., 2010). Knowles' (1984) theory of adult learning also supports use of experiential learning to promote reflection, application of knowledge, and personal/professional development. Furthermore, in line with Kolb's theory of experiential learning (1984), this assignment provided a concrete experience where students applied their knowledge to a novel learning experience.

Student reflections also highlighted individual differences in perceptions of the assignment. Some described high stress and frustration with the workload; others seemed to value the challenge and described several personal/professional benefits. Individual variation in maturity, professionalism, and work ethic is aligned with the concept of student readiness described by Sanford's Person-Environment Theory (1966). That is, personal traits and a specific environmental context must both align to create a student's readiness to learn. Because of the intensity and novelty of this assignment, student reflections indicated a need for extensive support. According to Sanford (1966), the degree of challenges a student can take on depends on the amount of support received in a learning environment. Individual differences in readiness to learn will affect how students respond to learning challenges. Therefore, it is important for instructors to work closely with students to provide a supportive context for individual learning.

Lessons Learned

A major conclusion from this evaluation is that students need additional concrete guidance in how to collaborate effectively in groups. Students were limited in how much time they had to meet in person together. Generally, they found document sharing, emailing, using telecommunication platforms (e.g., Skype, Zoom) to be challenging. Specific training in group work and meeting etiquette as well as training in some commonly used technological collaboration tools could improve group work. Students also reported needing more direct

support throughout the assignment because it was a very novel experience. Despite writing instructions, providing examples, and offering in-class time for questions, students reported that they remained uncertain of how to complete the assignment. Some reported that they did not use the examples or resources as much as they could have. In their reflection papers, many students reported that assignment elements were completed in close proximity to the deadlines. Overall quality of workshop planning and implementation may be improved by providing direct support and scaffolding to students and by having checkpoints before official deadlines.

A viable solution for the scheduling and group work challenges is to transition to a flipped classroom. When a class is “flipped,” students are expected to read and watch video lectures online to prepare for class. Instructors then gauge student learning through reading or lecture guides, quizzes, and/or in-class activities (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013). Time once reserved for lecture can be spent doing group work with more one-on-one engagement from the instructor using the content students were responsible for outside of class. This could address challenges students identified regarding assignment expectations, discrepancies in work ethic, lack of inclusive communication, scheduling group meetings, and difficulty spending time-on-task during group meetings. The flipped classroom model is gaining popularity in HDFS programs and flipping the class in upper-division HDFS classes could allow for more engaged, experiential learning.

Limitations

This study must be interpreted considering limitations associated with the small sample and qualitative data collection method. A limitation of using reflection papers is that respondents vary significantly in their perceptiveness and ability to articulate their experiences (Creswell, 2014). However, evaluation of student reflections is a key method to understanding the nuanced outcomes of community-based learning opportunities and serves to supplement self-report quantitative data (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009). Another possible issue is that student participants may have included inauthentic or incomplete information as this was a required course assignment. Some may have felt pressured to write positive responses in an assignment. To prevent this sort of pressure, the assignment description clearly stated that their responses would not be graded for how positive/negative their perceptions were. This was repeated verbally to students, yet it is possible that some felt pressured to write inauthentic responses. However, it is notable that many reflections included negative evaluations of the assignment or experience working in groups. It warrants mentioning that generalizability is not possible from the results of this work due to the small sample size. However, generalizability was not a primary goal of this research. Instead, the value is in the description of students’ experiences in the context of a course (Greene & Caracelli, 1997).

Implications & Future Directions for Service Learning in HDFS

Moving forward, it is important that university educators use assignments to develop knowledge and skills that employers desire in HDFS graduates. Students may need more preparation and scaffolding in terms of learning how to delegate tasks, to work independently as group members, and to communicate and collaborate electronically. These skills should be a focus of assignments throughout coursework in HDFS programs so that as students approach

graduation, they have skills necessary for their future employment or educational experiences. One way to develop skills is through direct, hands-on experiential learning (Celio et al., 2011; Chenneville, Toler, & Gaskin-Butler, 2012; Jaccoby, 2015; Kolb, 1984).

Why should HDFS faculty consider incorporating service learning into their courses? Many instructors are apprehensive about incorporating service learning into their courses due to the potential time/energy costs (Banerjee & Hausafus, 2007). Designing and guiding students through this project required considerable time and effort. With real world experience for the students came real world stressors above and beyond the usual stress related to grading and preparing for classes. For faculty, service learning provides opportunities for interdisciplinary collaborations with other faculty and community agencies and the potential for applied research. Faculty can engage in more meaningful relationships with students throughout these types of high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008). Finally, with increased research supporting the value of this pedagogy, using this approach illustrates instructors' commitment to student development, engaged scholarship, and civic engagement (Hatcher, 2011).

Conclusion

Regardless of the specific fields in which students will eventually work, a consistent theme about the utility of this assignment to providing professional skills for their future education or careers emerged. Incorporating experiential or service learning into coursework in varying degrees could improve students' abilities to crystallize their career plans by requiring hands-on exploration of different professional arenas. Instructors can provide guided opportunities for students to practice professional roles, particularly as they approach the transition from student to new professional. Despite challenges of doing experiential learning there are benefits for students, faculty, and the community. Adaptations to the traditional course format through implementation of a flipped classroom may improve instructors' abilities to scaffold students throughout an intensive service learning assignment focused on skill development and knowledge application.

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