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Enhancing Confidence and Teaching Efficacy in Youth Relationship Education Practice Through Service-Learning

Lindsey Almond, Department of Human Development and Family Science, Auburn University 

Silvia Vilches, Department of Human Development and Family Science, Auburn University 

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Department of Human Development and Family Science, Auburn University 

ABSTRACT. Youth Relationship Education (YRE) utilizes experienced community educators as facilitators; however, there is limited research on preparing university students for these roles. A new service-learning model offers a “near-peer” training; in this study nine undergraduates and four facilitator-instructors provided structured self and observer reflections. Five categories of learning are evident: building efficacy through the process of preparation and instruction; growth through supportive peers and instructors; developing comfort with teaching skills; the value of reflective processes and feedback; and desiring more: insights from suggestions. The results demonstrate the importance of processing emotions and emotional connections, the strength of supportive relationships as a safe learning space, and the effectiveness of structure for active learning. Integrating teaching experiences can provide students confidence and practical skills, and link students’ academic knowledge with applied experiences.

Keywords: Action research, professional development, reflection, service-learning, skill development, teaching, undergraduate education, youth relationship education

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Direct correspondence to: Lindsey Almond, Ph.D., 210 Spidle Hall, Auburn, AL 36849. Email: lla0009@auburn.edu



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Enhancing confidence and teaching efficacy in youth relationship education practice through service-learning

Many students leave university with new knowledge but would benefit from developing practical skills. Without practical experience, graduates may avoid situations in which they feel unprepared to succeed (Tice & Nelson, 2019). Feelings of preparedness can be fostered through the confidence and leadership developed through service-learning (Gibson et al., 2011; Tice & Nelson, 2019; Wasserman, 2009; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Action, or active learning is the learning process that occurs when gaining knowledge and reflecting on experiences, as opposed to simply being taught content (Revans, 1971).

Many disciplines offer structured practicum experiences and have investigated the development of teaching efficacy (Gerholz et al., 2018; Salam et al., 2019). Teaching efficacy is the belief in one's ability to successfully deliver educational content and engage students to promote learning (Tice & Nelson, 2019; Stewart, 2012; Wasserman, 2009). However, most of the research on changes in teaching efficacy has been conducted with pre-service education students. In the discipline of human development and family science (HDFS), there appears to be only one study of service-learning in youth relationship education (YRE) educator preparation (McElwain et al., 2016). YRE is an evidence-based community education initiative that has been typically offered through community agency partnerships with schools (Hawkins, 2018). The program evaluation was the first to document student experiences in a service-learning course focused on delivery of YRE in high schools and provides suggestions for how to better serve the high school population receiving the relationship education programming (McElwain et al., 2016). An awareness of this study is recommended for further understanding of the structure and implementation of the service-learning experience outlined in this article. Both the McElwain study and this study exhibit evaluative work from the Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative (AHMREI; Alabama Healthy Marriage & Relationship Education, n.d.). For individuals interested in the set up or findings from AHMREI's community-based YRE and YRE-focused service-learning can find additional information in Appendix A.

The current study was conducted in the context of AHMREI's ongoing federally-funded university partnership with local schools se focused on YRE program effectiveness. We center the examination on undergraduate students' experiences in a semester-long service-learning course, where they were trained to teach the well-established YRE program in local high schools. We employed a developmental lens and an action research approach to better understand the benefits of active learning for these students. The analysis used structured reflections on the service-learning experiences to gain insight into areas of development of students' beliefs in their teaching efficacy so that steps can be taken to improve the experiences offered by this service-learning course.

The Value of Service-Learning as Teacher-Training

Higher education has begun promoting the use of service-learning as a way to teach students about social change while giving back to the local community (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Salam et al., 2019). Other applied academic opportunities such as practicums, internships, and field experiences are like the service-learning experience; however, service-learning courses combine the class experience (e.g., class meetings, training, processing, graded assignments) and the applied experience, whereas practicums, internships, and field experiences may solely consist of the applied experience (Potthoff et al., 2000). Through service-learning, communities receive positive outcomes (e.g., access to resources, increased awareness, addressing a need) and students receive personal and academic benefits (Celio et al., 2011; Gerholz et al., 2018). Typically, service-learning courses offer students the opportunity to apply new and previously learned material to real-world situations, leading to a more holistic

understanding of the material (Salam et al., 2019). Students gain transferable skills, such as oral and written communication skills, interpersonal skills, collaboration, and leadership development (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Salam et al., 2019). Service-learning has also been shown to improve academic achievement by enhancing critical and higher-order thinking, deeper content understanding, analytic skills, problem-solving, writing, and students' ability to apply concepts to real-world situations (Gerholz et al., 2018; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Salam et al., 2019; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Within the last few decades, higher education has reestablished the importance of service-learning for practical experience (Hébert & Hauf, 2015).

However, there are benefits beyond skill development, too. University students, who are mainly emerging adults, undergo a process of identity development as they focus on their future and face numerous life choices (Schwartz et al., 2013). Identity development is a fluid process involving an internalization of expectations and ideas of the self, shaped through knowledge, experiences, and other possible influences (Daniels & Brooker, 2017). Service-learning helps foster identity development by providing professional socialization and community engagement, promoting students' growth and reflection within community or larger process (Mahon et al., 2020). As students make choices, they have expressed greater civic and moral awareness, appreciation of diversity, cultural sensitivity, and clearer understanding of their career desires (Caspersz & Olaru, 2017; Celio et al., 2011; Gerholz et al., 2018; Gibson et al., 2011; Hébert & Hauf, 2015). Students have reported enhanced self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, acceptance, and empathy as a result of their service-learning experiences (Celio et al., 2011; Gerholz et al., 2018; Hébert & Hauf, 2015; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Service-learning has been widely implemented in teacher training programs to develop skills, comfort, and teaching efficacy (Salam et al., 2019; Tice & Nelson, 2019); however, less is known about the influence of training and support on university students with no prior teaching knowledge or experience. When teachers feel confident in their abilities, they are more likely to positively engage with students and help them learn (Tice & Nelson, 2019). They are also more likely to enjoy teaching and experience less burnout if they have a higher sense of efficacy (Stewart, 2012). Likewise, to successfully aid in the development of teacher efficacy and awareness, learning activities and objectives must be relevant (Salam et al., 2019).

Several elements of service-learning, such as instructor-and-peer-support, have been shown to increase teaching efficacy (Stewart, 2012), demonstrating that social support is a fundamental element of the service-learning experience. Encouragement, guidance, modeling teaching, and feedback can help students feel comfortable interacting with their instructor and peers and aid in connecting their experiences to learning (Stewart, 2012; Tice & Nelson, 2019; Yorio & Ye, 2012). Tice & Nelson (2019) suggest that teaching efficacy is enhanced when students collaboratively reflect and problem-solve, correctly or skillfully demonstrate their training, and exchange feedback with course peers. Students have felt that their experiences helped them become better-developed teachers, while also indicating that service-learning allowed them a chance to integrate and apply knowledge from various courses, thus gaining a deeper understanding of the material (Potthoff et al., 2000). McElwain et al. (2016) found similar results with students of diverse majors preparing to facilitate community youth-based relationship education.

Service-learning courses generally rely on a few foundational elements: classroom instruction, service action that integrates students' knowledge and experience, and a reflection element (Potthoff et al., 2000; Salam et al., 2019). Reflection helps students evolve by contemplating how their thoughts, feelings, opinions, knowledge, and skills have changed throughout the service-learning experience. Reflection also helps students more formally and clearly express the knowledge and skills they have

gained (DeFillippi, 2001; Gerholz et al., 2018), and aids students in achieving a sense of meaning from their work (Chandavimol et al., 2013). Students are most likely to benefit from this reflective process if they are interested and engaged in the learning experience (Gibson et al., 2011). Conversely, students who report a gain in understanding or knowledge from their service-learning course are also more likely to be engaged in the service-learning experience (Gerholz et al., 2018).

In service-learning courses, the instructor is a guide who poses questions to students' reflective process (DeFillippi, 2001; Gibson et al., 2011), adjusting the course based on students' feedback and reflection on their own agency. Co-reflection between the instructor and student can help build collaborative relationships and foster academic and personal growth (Tice & Nelson, 2019). Through the process of planning and training, instructors influence how prepared their students will be to serve within their community (Celio et al., 2011). Later, instructors serve as role models when students implement their service experiences (Stewart, 2012).

Active (Action) Learning Theoretical Framework

Action learning theory proposes that learning occurs at the intersection of instruction and questioning (DeFillippi, 2001; Revans, 1971). Critical learning is assumed to occur naturally through reflective processes, experience, and the proclivity to seek deeper understanding (DeFillippi, 2001; Sofo et al., 2010). Revans (2011) suggests that by answering structured questions, students are prompted to develop conceptualizations (theories) through awareness that there may be many possible solutions to any one problem or question. This awareness, a key feature of active learning, may involve categorizing, comparing, contrasting, and questioning (Sofo et al., 2010). While these learning elements also appear in other learning environments (e.g., behavioral, experiential, problem-based), in action learning, reflection is intertwined with the act of practice teaching by students (Revans, 2011). Relational-cultural theory (RCT) further suggests that students' identity development evolves through their relationships and experiences with others (Miller, 1976). This concept is particularly relevant to this study, which focuses on YRE.

Context for the Current Study

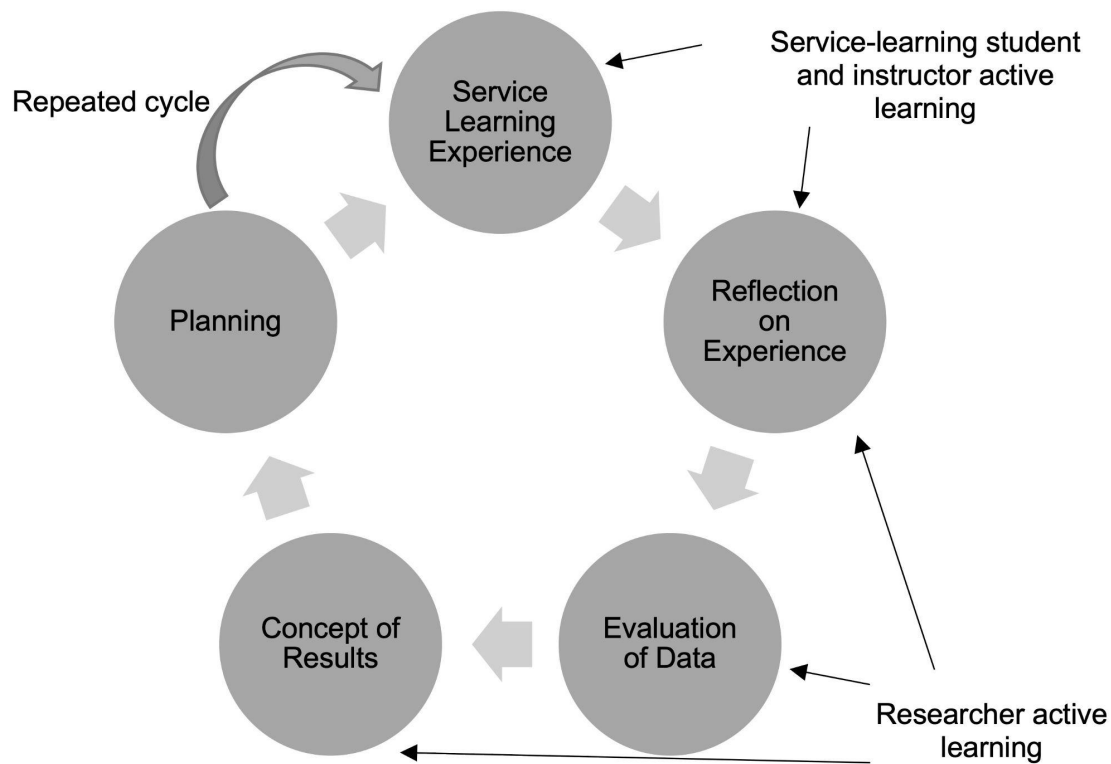
This study focuses on undergraduate students who voluntarily enrolled in a service-learning course within a HDFS department for 1-3 credit hours. Students are generally recommended to take the course for two or three credit hours, as this allows for more opportunities to teach in the high schools. One credit hour typically requires 45 hours of work, while three credit hours requires approximately 135 hours across the semester (i.e., 3-9 work hours a week). This course is offered as a fall and spring elective by the faculty researcher engaged in a federally funded project to improve and sustain healthy relationships amongst adolescents through relationship education in a school-based setting (AHMREI, n.d.). A significant body of work conducted over the past 2 decades documents the effectiveness of YRE in promoting high school students' social competence, relationship self-efficacy, and better mental health (Hawkins, 2018; McElwain et al., 2017). In this experience, undergraduate students learn and teach Relationship Smarts Plus, an evidence-based youth relationship education program (Pearson, 2013). Relationship Smarts Plus focuses on communication skills, self-awareness, healthy friendships and romantic relationships, dating violence, and decision-making skills (Pearson, 2013). More information about the topics covered in each session and a link to the list of published research on the Relationship Smarts Plus program can be found in Appendix A. As part of the current project, service-learning students were utilized as relationship educators near the university site, while professional relationship educators at community agencies implemented this curriculum at other locations around the state. The service-learning model is potentially a sustainable model for offering

YRE to local high schools since undergraduate students receive course credit and experience rather than payment for facilitation.

Students are first taught a structured youth-based relationship education program (Phase 1). They then practice teaching the material to their peers and instructors (Phase 2), and finally, they teach the material in local high schools (Phase 3). In the initial training phase, graduate students on the instructor team facilitate the lessons as they would in a high school setting, providing teaching tips specific to each lesson. Graduate students on the instructor team have prior experience teaching the program. During the second phase, paired students demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the lessons by teaching them to their peers and instructors, while receiving corrective feedback. It is within the second phase that graduate student instructors assist service-learning students' cultural awareness by posing examples and questions that invoke students' thoughts and responses in a culturally responsive way, which research supports as necessary diversity and cultural training for preservice teacher training (Potthoff et al., 2000). In the final phase, service-learning students demonstrate their teaching abilities and understanding of the material by co-facilitating lessons within local high school classes.

Throughout the course, service-learning students have structured opportunities to participate in action learning. However, to avoid terminology confusion in this study, which utilizes an action research framework, action learning is referred to here as "active" learning theory. Students complete reflective journals, along with structured facilitation and observation notes, prompting them to engage in active learning. Course instructor-mentors (graduate students) participate in all three phases, gaining insight into the process of change occurring for the students. The multiple types of reflections provide the first author (as a researcher and instructor), insider (undergraduate student learner), and outsider (course instructor) insight into the process of active learning. A conceptualization of the cycle of active learning within the action research cycle can be found in Figure 1.

During Phase 3, students taught in two high school classrooms. School A hosted the lessons through their required health class which primarily consisted of 9th and 10th grade students, though 11th and 12th graders were occasionally present. The high school students in these classes were predominantly from minority backgrounds, with a balance of genders. School A's general population consists of approximately 70% minority, 60% low socioeconomic status, and an even distribution of gender. School B hosted lessons through their elective family and consumer sciences course, which included students from 9th through 12th grade. High school students in these classes were more likely to be female and Caucasian, though not exclusively. School B's general population is approximately 40% minority students, 27% low socioeconomic status, and even distribution of sexes. The faculty researcher, graduate students, and project staff established the school partnerships for delivery of this relationship education program through meetings with school administrators and teachers to explain the relevance of relationship education as life skills training valued in health and health-related classes. Evidence of the published program effectiveness is also provided. Materials and content are also made available for review. These local partnerships have been maintained for nearly 20 years. More details on this partnership model are described in previous work (McElwain et al., 2016).

Figure 1*Service-Learning Active Learning within an Action Research Approach*

Note. Active learning occurring within the action research cycle is used within this study to analyze the elements of change within the course.

Research Questions

In this study, we sought to identify the benefits of service-learning in human sciences, specifically in youth relationship education. Within the frameworks of active learning theory and relational-cultural theory, we anticipated that students would develop their sense of teaching efficacy through practice teaching, self-reflection, and instructor feedback. We anticipated that modeling would be an important element of the training process (Stewart, 2012); however, we also wondered if modeling was only integral to the initial training phases or whether it was also important throughout the service-learning course. We also focused on the influence of a trifold (instruction, practice teaching, community) service-learning experience on non-preservice university students' self-evaluation of their teaching efficacy. The research questions specifically are: (1) Which elements or phases of the service-learning course are beneficial in developing students' teaching efficacy, and how? and (2) How can the instructor team can best support student development of teaching efficacy?

Methods

Research Design

Action research is initiated to produce better outcomes, which in turn guides research questions and the process of inquiry (McNiff et al., 1996). The process of conducting action research involves an arc that starts with (i.) planning, then (ii.) appraising the action, and finally, (iii.) concluding with results arising from the action (Majgaard et al., 2011). Learning from reflection is part of the research designed action-learning cycle; thus reflection serves as both data and part of the analysis development (McNiff et al., 1996). The service-learning course provided a team-based approach with lead author (lead instructor), co-instructors (graduate students), and course enrollees (undergraduate students).

The first action cycle (planning) occurred when students learned by observing instruction from the graduate student instructors, practicing teaching, reflecting on their teaching efficacy, and planning their lessons. The second action research cycle involved the lead author learning by teaching, observing the students' teaching, and reflecting on what was occurring. The third action learning cycle was the interaction of the lead author's reflection, as the researcher, upon the students' reflections of their experience as the learning process concluded. These action cycle steps informed the analysis by focusing on specific elements of the service-learning experience that induce changes in students' appraisal of their teaching efficacy.

Recruitment and Sample

Participants included undergraduate students and graduate-level instructors who participated in a HDFS service-learning course during the 2020 spring semester. The course provided a mentored experience teaching YRE for 1-3 credit hours. On the first day of class, all instructors (n=4) and students (n=9) provided informed consent for the use of their course materials for this study; instructors and students were informed that their decision regarding participation in the study would not impact their course experience or grade. The participants majored in Communication Disorders, English, HDFS, Psychology, and Social Work. Among the undergraduate students, most were seniors (n = 5), with 3 juniors and 1 sophomore. The students identified as women (n=8); men (n=1), White (n=6), Latinx (n=2), and Asian (n=1). In addition, the instructor team (n=4) consisted entirely of women, including the lead author, and identified as White (n=2), African American (n=1), and Asian (n=1). Data were coded using participant IDs to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

Reflective and observational data were collected from the students' and instructor teams' perspectives, including student journals and facilitator forms (FF), holistically providing self-reflections and observer views of the students' experiences. Journal 1 (J1) was submitted in the first week of the course (Phase 1), and reflected students' reasons for taking the course, their previous experiences, goals for the course, and open comments. During this phase, students experienced the YRE program as if they were high school students. Journal 2 (J2) was submitted in the middle of the semester (Phase 3) when students practiced teaching the YRE to the instructional team and their peers (teach-backs). These journals focused on what students had learned about themselves, including their strengths, areas of improvement, and teaching efficacy. Journal 3 (J3), submitted at the end of the semester (post-Phase 3), after teaching to high school students with a co-facilitator, addressed reflections on their goals, overall experience, feedback, suggestions for improvements, and other closing thoughts.

Student facilitator forms (FF), the second type of reflective data, were completed after each teaching session in the high schools (Phase 3). These forms prompted them to free-write about their

strengths, weaknesses, and ideas pertaining to their facilitation of the lesson. In addition, service-learning students and the instructor team observed others teaching lessons in the local high schools (Phase 3). Observer forms (OF) were used to capture observations of others' teaching in preparation for providing feedback, with space to record suggestions and comments. Although local high schools and the sponsoring university temporarily shut down in spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 69 data points (observations and reflections) were collected across the three phases before the interruption, capturing changes over time during the first 2 ½ months of the course. Typically, this HDFS course is completed over 4 months. After the university reopened, service-learning students completed the remainder of the course virtually through regularly scheduled meetings and reflections. Additional experiences were added to the remainder of the course for students' professional development through free training, webinars, and other virtual opportunities to deepen their teaching and youth relationship education knowledge. These experiences were not part of the reflections, nor were they included in this study.

Data analysis

Data from all five sources (J1, J2, J3, FF, OF) were analyzed using a six-phase process to code and develop themes across the data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the phases, the researcher becomes familiar with the data, codes data, composes themes, reviews themes, names themes, and relates the themes back to the literature and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An additional step was taken to group codes into categories, and themes across categories were then developed within the discussion. The course instructor team was invited to assist in reviewing the categories to check the data interpretation. The perspectives of the other instructors were important because, as a service-learning instructor, the lead author was part of the team involved in undergraduate student recruitment, teaching, grading, supervision, and feedback. Although researchers intervene in their environments within an action research approach (McNiff et al., 1996), the lead author's observations (data) were deliberately juxtaposed with the student's and instructor team's reflective and observational data to check assumptions and provide a holistic view of the service-learning experience. In summary, the lead instructor (lead author) used a reflexive self-examination and an interpretive stance to cultivate shared meaning from student and instructor experiences (Cope, 2010).

Findings

Five categories describe the core elements of the active learning process: (i.) building efficacy through the process of preparation and instruction; (ii.) growth through supportive peers and instructors; (iii.) developing comfort with teaching skills; (iv.) the value of reflective processes and feedback, and; (v.) desiring more: insights from suggestions. Codes supporting themes are illustrated with direct quotes and labeled according to participant ID and data form (e.g., P1J1 as participant 1, journal 1; FF for facilitator form; OF for observer form). Following the presentation of the findings, three themes revealed through the findings are discussed.

Building Efficacy through the Process of Preparation and Instruction

The first category captures the process of learning to teach the structured YRE curriculum through preparation techniques like writing a teaching script, creating content examples, and practicing outside the classroom. They were first taught the curriculum as participants, then reversed roles and prepared to teach the material back to their peers (teach-backs).

As teachers, we were able to have plenty of practice. I like that we were able to participate in the lessons and activities as students before we attempted teaching it. This gave us two perspectives on the material and a rounded view on both sides of learning and teaching. [P8J2]

The teach-backs offered a low-risk opportunity to practice teaching, give and receive feedback, and become more familiar with the curriculum before teaching in the high schools. During the teach-backs, students posed questions that the audience might ask; this role playing as high school students helping them to prepare.

I most enjoyed learning the material and teach-backs... We were able to bounce ideas and interact with each other as if we were the students. The different perspectives prepared me for teaching with someone else and what I might expect from the students. [P9J3]

Students wanted regular meetings throughout the duration of the semester to keep the material fresh in their minds and continue to learn from their peers' experiences. While recognizing how teach-backs inspired confidence, some students also wanted more time with their co-facilitator before teach-backs and official teaching. P2 said, "I would like to start meeting with my co-facilitator the week we are teaching to rehearse the lessons, so I feel more in tune with them [J2]."

The codes within this category included comfort with teaching, knowledge of the curriculum, less reliance on the curriculum script while teaching, engaging with the audience, and gaining the ability to extemporize. Each of these was linked to growth in confidence. For example, P1 reflected that, "I learned that the most important things when teaching are to know your material and be confident [J2]." The skill elements contributed to a sense of comfort: "As I gained experience in the classroom, I also became more comfortable being able to think on my feet and provide examples to students [P8J3]," reflecting successful scaffolding between learning about YRE content, practicing, and building self-awareness.

Journals reflected a cycle of emotions, starting with nervousness and discomfort related to students' feelings about teaching or understanding of the material. Students reported feeling prepared because of their knowledge of the material but then feeling nervous before teaching in the high school, followed by feelings of ease or enjoyment after teaching.

What I liked the least was when I had to teach for the first time. I was super nervous and not knowing how it would go freaked me out. But, once I did it and got it over with, I really enjoyed it. [P3J3]

Students' journals also indicated that the course research paper helped them connect course knowledge and research with personal experiences.

This category marks the beginning of a continuous active learning arc throughout the course and revealed an accompanying cycle of emotions. Through the journals and reflective research paper, students developed an understanding of teaching, and their sense of teaching efficacy began to grow.

Growth through Supportive Peers and Instructors

The second category highlights the benefits and growth gained through mentoring by course instructors, working in teams, and co-facilitating. Students' journals expressed appreciation for the instructors' approachability, willingness to help, and dedication beyond their required duties. Instructors actively assisted in the high school teaching. For example, the lead author noted a few observations where an instructor guided a student co-facilitator through a teaching challenge. Students found feedback not only helpful but also essential for growth.

My favorite part of working with the team was the [instructors'] willingness to help ... There was never a time when I felt as if it would be a bother to ask for help, clarification, or suggestions. The leadership from the [instructors] extended beyond their duty to teach us the material. They also built our confidence by never tearing anyone down for how they taught the information. With every suggestion, there was encouragement. This was very helpful for me because I tend to tear myself down when I receive criticism. [P8J3]

Interactive experiences within the team environment were important and led to conversations about teaching experiences, lesson flow, and skills like interjecting while teaching. Students appreciated the non-competitive environment and even distribution of work between co-facilitators, without the need to speak more or outperform others. Co-facilitation enabled students to bond and learn from each other. Most importantly, they enjoyed getting to know the instructors and their peers, as P3 reveals: "My experience working on the team has been great. I enjoyed the most when we were getting to know the lessons, we also got to get to know each other" [J3]. This connection between co-facilitators strengthened over time as lessons progressed and students gained teaching experience. None of the students mentioned any adverse experiences with a co-facilitator.

After co-facilitating, students reflected on their teaching in relation to their peers. Students learned by observing each other and discovering teaching skills they wanted to adopt, such as using humor and deflecting or redirecting questions from the audience.

When I taught with [other participant] last week, I saw how good she was with the students. She was engaging and got them laughing and was incredible with comparison between the results of the silent and live auction. [P6J2]

This category, focused on growth through teamwork, revealed the power of feeling supported through peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor connections. The non-competitive, gently constructive environment enabled students to discuss and share experiences, which bolstered their growing sense of teaching efficacy.

Developing Comfort with Teaching Skills

There were three main codes related to teaching skills or attributes: connecting with the audience, public speaking, and comfort or discomfort with teaching. Connection skills for large groups included encouraging participation, prompting the elaboration of discussions, and answering audience questions. Students initially reported inconsistently connecting with the high school students during teaching and recognized that their discomfort, such as silence while waiting for the audience to answer questions or engage, affected their comfort and ability to interact with the audience. Within their OF, students and instructors noted that the instructor-observers tried to coach in these situations, suggesting, for instance, that instead of saying something general, like "good," they should build on the students' answers and invite them to elaborate further (P5OF). However, in small group settings, students reported feeling nervous when interacting with high school students because it was more personalized. For example, in reference to areas of improvement, P9FF said, "Poor eye contact, I didn't know how to quiet them down, talked fast, I didn't let the awkward silence go on for them to answer."

Other skills that fostered connections included improvising, providing examples, and using appropriate humor. Instructor observations and student reflections reinforced the idea that humor enhanced relatability and interaction with the audience. From her observer forms (OF), the first author noted that Participant 9 provided a great example of love for pizza vs. love for a partner, which engaged and interested students.

Students were initially uncomfortable with public speaking. Public speaking skills included making eye contact, moderating speech pace, learning to project vocally, and using an authoritative presence and tone. Regardless of skill level, students felt that preparation and understanding of the material promoted their ability to extemporize and boosted their confidence in facilitating lessons. Students reflected on their growing ability to adapt their teaching to incorporate audience discussion points and provide relatable examples, which helped them deliver better lessons. “It was difficult for me to walk around and talk to the students while they were making their possible-selves tree. I didn’t know what to say and I was very nervous.” (P1FF).

As students developed their skills, they reported becoming more comfortable by observing others, receiving feedback, and practicing. Students reflected that projecting confidence and authority could be applied in the future to develop better classroom management techniques and improve their public speaking skills.

Reflective Processes and Feedback as Active Learning

Reflection and feedback promoted awareness, which is a key component of active learning. Feedback and reflection were integrated into the service-learning course structure. Students valued and appreciated feedback, noting that absence of audience feedback would have made it more difficult to improve their skills. For example, P6 noted that they “like to watch someone do something, then try to do it afterwards and get feedback on my performance. It helps me to hear feedback so that I can make adjustments and try to fix those things the next time I do it” (J1).

Reflective processes were prompted through the facilitator forms and journals, helping students recognize which learning methods worked well for them. Structured reflections helped students assess their progress and identify ways to improve their teaching, revealing the depth of insights they gain through reflection.

I appreciate the journal entries because I can reflect on the progress being made. It is easy to go through the motions of requirements and not think about how you are doing and how you can be better...I can identify the positive and negative things that have taken place and provide solutions. [P8J2]

The curriculum material also prompted students to consider their personal relationships, leading some to reflect on their conflict management and communication skills.

I started a new relationship around Thanksgiving, and it has been interesting to see how my relationship compares to this program. I have noticed that my boyfriend and I handle conflict very well, and when we got to the lessons on how to raise an issue effectively, I learned names and formats for things I was already doing. It is so cool to be able to be a firsthand testament to the curriculum. [P2J2]

Focused reflections also helped students consider their future professional and career plans, as P5 stated: “I got really excited about this opportunity as it will help me decide what in the world I actually want to do” [J1].

When reflecting on the overall experience, students mentioned that the experience pushed them out of their comfort zones, which helped them improve. Students valued and appreciated the feedback from their peers and instructors, as well as the connections between their prior academic knowledge, the material, their teaching experiences, and their personal relationship and occupational goals. This

learning and reflection expanded their experiences and challenged them, leading to their growth as YRE facilitators.

Desiring More: Insights from Suggestions

The fifth category reflects students' desire to improve their teaching efficacy, as indicated by their suggestions of what was working and their awareness of need for more instruction. Students said they would feel better prepared if they were encouraged to write their own teaching scripts, continue to have regular course meetings throughout the semester, have more practice time before teaching in the high schools, and receive more information on facilitation techniques and audience engagement.

Students believed that meeting more frequently and writing their own scripts would help them retain the material. Increasing the number of meetings would give them more opportunities to learn from each other's experiences and provide the instructor team with more time to address teaching strategies and explain lessons and activities. Students also wanted more preparation time and preferred that it be mandatory, so that they would be required, rather than just strongly encouraged, to practice more outside of the classroom.

I think it might be useful to have a day where our class meets and talks about some things that we've learned so far from our teaching. Even if no earthshaking information comes up, it's a good chance to hear about personal experiences and thoughts that otherwise might not get shared. Sometimes those experiences highlight a lesson that everyone can keep in mind as they continue their work individually. [P4J2]

Both students and the instructor team acknowledge the need for additional training on facilitation techniques, extemporizing, and interacting with the high school students. Students particularly wanted to learn more about how to expand on the material, when and how to provide personal examples, and how to answer unexpected questions appropriately.

Add ... some extra context/research on important facilitation techniques before we go into the classroom, [and] a debrief with the teachers to get information about the students we are teaching. [P3J3]

When students observed their peers or an instructor teach in the high school before teaching themselves, they felt better acclimated and prepared, while those who did not felt they could have benefitted from some modeling. Both students and instructors felt that consistently co-facilitating with the same person created a teaching bond that helped with preparation.

The most challenging part (which is not really that challenging) was making sure you and your teaching partner are on the same page. If possible, I would suggest that teachers teach with the same 1 or 2 people so that they could get the hang of one another and could prepare in advance. [P9J3]

The course suggestions indicated that both students and instructors believed teaching efficacy, which includes a belief in oneself, was fostered by understanding the material and feeling bonded with co-facilitators. The sense of efficacy helped students learn how to appropriately manage and engage with their audience. Students and instructors affirmed that more practice led to increased confidence.

Discussion

Action research entails learning from doing. In this study, we aimed to understand the elements of change within a service-learning course to gain insight into the key components influencing students' teaching efficacy and identity development. The structured reflection components built into the course helped focus students' attention and deepen their active learning by prompting them to reflect on their

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development through their experiences. The five categories of experience outlined above describe the elements of change and key components that contributed to the development of teaching efficacy. Although these categories are distinct, they intertwine with each other and reveal three main themes; (i.) the effectiveness of the structure to support active learning; (ii.) the importance of processing emotions and emotional connections, and (iii.) the strength of supportive relationships as a safe space in which to learn.

The course structure seemed to support teaching efficacy, which, as discussed earlier, refers to the belief in one's ability to successfully deliver educational content and engage students to foster learning (Tice & Nelson, 2019; Stewart, 2012; Wasserman, 2009). The findings affirm that, similar to teacher pre-service learning, students developed confidence in their understanding of and preparation to teach the material. Students found that the instructor team modeling provided the necessary scaffolding to enhance their teaching efficacy before they practiced. Similar to the findings from Tice and Nelson (2019), modeling supported students' sense of efficacy by increasing their confidence in answering questions from the audience or managing challenges that might arise. While previous research has focused on instructor modeling (Stewart, 2012), this study also found that service-learning peers provided additional important modeling. Students benefited from the opportunity to see the curriculum modeled and then practiced with feedback from peers before they engaged in teaching. Since feedback is not typically gathered during teaching, the experience provided students with the chance to gain clarity about the material and teaching methods. Consistent with previous research, practice helped students feel better prepared and more confident in their leadership (Tice & Nelson, 2019; Yorio & Ye, 2012). The combined experiences of modeling and feedback supplied service-learning students with the chance to actively learn through the interpretation of others' experiences (Tice & Nelson, 2019).

For many of the students, this course supplied a first teaching experience. Both positive (enjoyment, confidence, etc.) and negative (anxiety, nervousness, etc.) emotions were expressed and seemed to be an integral part of the learning process. Although emotions are a familiar concept in family science, they have received less attention in teacher preparation literature. Students' emotions were attached to nearly every aspect of the course experience and seemed to accompany their feelings of preparation. A cycle emerged showing students' nervousness before preparation, confidence after preparation, nervousness before teaching, and then confidence and enjoyment after teaching, with this cycle ongoing. Negative emotions dwindled with continued teaching and experience. Confidence and comfort were among the most common emotional expressions. These emotions were linked to preparation, feedback, mentoring by the instructor team or their peers, or were impeded by limited experience and reflections on the need for improvement. The instructor team and service-learning peers played a significant role in shaping the students' experiences and emotions, suggesting that the team environment was crucial for learning. In active learning, students organize their own understanding of the experience (Revans, 2011), but it appears that the positive and supportive relationships among students and between students and the instructor team in this human science course also promoted students' self-assessment and confidence in their teaching abilities.

Relational-cultural theory (RCT) suggests that these relationships and bonds among those involved in the service-learning course are developed through their shared experiences (Miller, 1976). Relationships play a crucial role in shaping identity development through experiences, reflections, and interactions (Daniels & Brooker, 2017; Miller, 1976). Using a relational-cultural lens draws our attention to the importance of trusting relationships for creating bonding between cohort learners, which in turn encourages a sense of belonging (Rujimora et al., 2024). Bonding is important for assisting service-learning students to take the risks associated not only with learning, but with assuming the

identity of a teacher/professional (Daniels & Brooker, 2017). Though focused on a therapeutic relationship, Rose and Brown (2022) also point out that focusing on a relational orientation helps therapists become more empathetic, and in this study, RCT helps us understand how service-learning students' learning and empathic teaching experiences are being shaped through their relationships with their co-facilitators and YRE students. The team-based, supportive atmosphere reinforced students' engagement with each other and the instructor team throughout, and even beyond, the course. As each student's personal and teaching identity developed, peers and instructors were reported and identified as key positive influences. As Chandavimol et al. (2013) suggest, active learning contributes to students' growth, in this case, through the training and support provided to them before, during, and after their service-learning. Over the term of the course, the instructor team helped build students' confidence before teaching through open, nurturing, and encouraging interactions. Supportive connections can help students link their experiences to their learning process (Stewart, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012). As the course progressed, students' collaborative learning unfolded through co-facilitation. Co-facilitation can help develop teaching efficacy (Gerholz et al., 2018; Tice & Nelson, 2019), and as was seen in this case, students expressed a desire to support their peers and foster their teamwork skills. Data from facilitation reflections and journals provided clear insights into students' active learning process as they reflected on elements of others' teaching they wished to incorporate into their own practice and reinforced admirable teaching techniques from their peers. Rujimora et al. (2022) point out that more evidence is needed to explain relational-cultural approaches work, even though evidence for cohort learning demonstrates greater performance, attitudes, development and acculturation in higher education (p. 661). This study adds insight into the micro-elements of how students develop through peer relationships, motivation, teamwork, and adoption of practices observed in their experience.

While journals indicated students' learning of many admirable or excellent teaching techniques, they also revealed the process of development, rather than consistent application. For example, students often reflected on opportunities for improvement, even while the instructor team noted positive displays teaching techniques and skills. This suggests that students' reflections may be more self-critical, potentially undermining their teaching efficacy. Therefore, positive feedback from peers and instructors may be imperative for progress in learning. Not only can positive feedback support a sense of teaching efficacy, but conversing with peers allows students to normalize the process of growth, including the development of skills and identity. As noted above, relationships play a role in identity development (Daniels & Brooker, 2017). As students gain skills and interact with others in the course, they continuously reorganize their expectations and conceptualization of their teaching efficacy, contributing to an emergent identity as an effective YRE teacher.

The reflective process initiated a conceptualization of teaching efficacy and key elements in students' understanding what it means to be a good teacher. It is through active learning processes like these that Revans (2011) suggests students learn, question, and develop their experiences. Through reflection, students began to take ownership of their learning (DeFillippi, 2001; Sofo et al., 2010). The structured reflections built into the course helped students connect knowledge and concepts, while also allowing for reflection on the progress. Chandavimol et al. (2013) suggest that meaning is derived through the reflective process. The service-learning students applied this meaning to their own lives, incorporating their experiences and knowledge into their relationships, real-world scenarios, previous academic courses, and future career goals. The relational nature of the YRE curriculum and experience of working with adolescents appeared to be relevant to all students, despite the diversity in their fields of study, suggesting that YRE is both personally and universally relevant.

Since this experience was so influential in the development of students' sense of efficacy and identity, it was important that suggestions for course improvement came from them, rather than solely from instructor team's observations. Extending their learning, students wanted to learn additional facilitation techniques, such as how to provide examples and interacting with the audience. Their desire to continue developing skills indicates their developmental state and their willingness to engage in further growth. The effect of feeling more prepared became evident after students practiced responding to questions they might encounter in the classroom. Thus, increased practice time for lessons and facilitation techniques would help students feel more prepared to teach within the community, while also enhancing their sense of efficacy and identity development as YRE teachers.

Limitations

As Majgaard et al. (2011) describe, social and cultural contexts typically influence the outcomes of action research. For example, in some colleges and universities, applied teaching experiences may be regularly offered, and students may be more effectively prepared. This study was conducted at a research-intensive university in the southern US, within a family science department where such preparations are not typical, so the impact may have been greater. Caspersz and Olaru (2017) found that females, compared to males, derive more value from their service-learning experiences, and our sample of service-learning students consisted entirely of women. A more diverse group may express different values and outcomes from their relational experiences with their classmates. Research should assess the impact of homo- or hetero- geneous service-learning student groups on team cohesion.

The involvement of the first author as one of the service-learning instructors and the third author as the project principal investigator may have influenced student reflections if students believed certain types of reflections would affect their instructors or the project PI (third author). Potential interpretation bias was balanced by using multiple sources of observation, including co-instructor peer observations and by inviting two of the service-learning instructors to independently apply the first round of codes. They confirmed the validity of the codes and categories. The pandemic limited data gathering after the study was launched. However, the first author and other instructors, who had been involved with the course multiple times prior to the pandemic, perceived that the undergraduate students' learning experiences did not seem significantly different, except for being shortened. The data set would have been larger if it had been collected through to the end of the typical course experience. As the pandemic changed how we interact with online learning, future research is likely to benefit from understanding how active learning occurs for service-learning students in an online environment.

Implications and Future Research

This study explored the value of using service-learning to train cross-discipline students to teach and lead youth relationship education, a growing field requiring more educators. Using multiple data points to explore the learning process revealed the personal value of their experiences and identity development as effective teachers. It also highlights elements that encourage growth of skill and confidence such as course meeting, team environment and co-facilitation, that are important for developing relationships. Students appeared to want more initial instruction on facilitation techniques, such as body placement, vocal projection, extemporizing, and audience engagement, but they were able to identify these elements requiring refinement due to the structured reflections and discussions. Future research can continue to explore YRE effectiveness, with specific attention to programs delivered by service-learning students compared to community educators (i.e., the evidence-based model; McElwain et al., 2016). It would also be valuable to solicit feedback from the high school teacher on their perspective of the high school students' engagement and learning, as well as thoughts on the

service-learning student teacher's lesson delivery. Collecting this information would provide an additional outside perspective for service-learning students to reflect on during their continuous growth in the active learning cycle.

Ongoing and regular course meetings allowed students dedicated opportunities to discuss their experiences with co-facilitators and encouraged dialogue around concerns or challenges about the teaching experience. Students valued the opportunity to share and reflect, deepening bonds of trust between course members, which were important for building confidence and normalizing the experience. Deepening the bonds could be supported by employing a consistent selection of the same co-facilitation pairs. By facilitating consistently with a small partner group, students may feel more confident in their preparation and more knowledgeable about how to interact with their co-facilitator. Future research should be conducted to explore this bond between co-facilitators and its possible impact on teaching efficacy.

These are promising, yet preliminary, findings that students from multiple disciplines may benefit from applied service-learning experiences to learn to teach YRE. For those within HDFS fields, integrating teaching experiences with content learning provided students an opportunity to gain skills, link knowledge with applied experiences, and develop their identity as YRE educators through active learning. The active learning elements that promoted students' perceptions of teaching efficacy included structured reflections and relational course interactions. The educational methods that help students map academic learning onto their personal lives and career decisions can potentially enhance future occupational success, which is one of the important goals of higher education.

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Appendix A

Youth Relationship Education and Service Learning: Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative

The Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative, known as the “AHMREI,” was established in 2002 and has received funding support through a competitive process from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Office of Family Assistance (OFA) since 2006. The AHMREI represents the first coordinated effort to promote healthy, stable relationships in Alabama with a focus on both adult and youth populations. It has been guided by decades of research connecting relational health with physical health, socio-emotional health, mental health, educational attainment, and economic stability. As a long-standing, large-scale, partnership between faculty, students, and staff in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Auburn University and multiple state and community agencies, the AHMREI provides healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs and connections to family-strengthening resources. The AHMREI’s central site is located at Auburn University, and directly offers healthy marriage and relationship education in adjacent Lee and Macon counties using near-peer facilitators. During 2015-2020, nine additional direct implementation partner agencies provided programming and had a presence as a multi-service Family Resource Center, serving Elmore, Chambers, Etowah, Montgomery, Escambia, Jefferson, Morgan, Talladega, and Tuscaloosa counties. These sites used professional community educators to deliver the YRE program in local high schools as guest facilitators. Because the AHMREI strives to meet community members “where they are,” programs were hosted in diverse school and community based settings. For the two schools served by the near-peer facilitators who are the focus in the current study, the student demographics indicated nearly equal number of boys and girls, and a balance of White and non-White students, reflecting the general population. Youth programs were delivered mostly in high school Health classes through partnerships with local schools. During 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, program delivery was adapted to include live (synchronous), “distance learning classrooms” and citizens continued to participate in steady numbers in AHMREI’s free programs from their homes.

AHMREI uses Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+; Pearson, 2013) as the youth relationship education curriculum. RS+ is an evidence-informed and evidence-based curriculum specifically designed for adolescents. For a list of published effectiveness studies of RS+ see [Research Evaluations - The Dibble Institute](#). Multiple studies and meta-analyses document improvements in participants’ relationship skills knowledge, self-efficacy, and mental well-being. Youth are provided with skills for identifying unhealthy and potentially abusive relationships, along with information on healthy relationship development, communication, empathy and emotional understanding, affection and intimacy, and the role of social media in dating relationships. The topics are presented in the following order:

Session 1: Who am I and Where am I Going? and Maturity Issues and What I Value

- Sets the foundation for learning healthy relationship skills
- Youth get in touch with their sense of identity and considering their possible selves (who they might become in the future) and explore their personal values

Session 2: Attractions and Infatuation and Principles of Smart Relationships

- Emphasizes affection and intimacy by recognizing the building blocks of a healthy relationship, understanding attraction, and developing a realistic concept of love
- Youth practice skills for handling attractions and maintaining boundaries in early relationship experiences and learn to recognize signs of “smart” and “not-so-smart” relationship attitudes, behaviors, and choices

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Session 3: Is it a Healthy Relationship? *and* Breaking Up and Dating Violence

- Brings awareness for understanding consent and recognizing signs of unhealthy relationships and intimate partner violence/dating violence and coercive control
- Youth practice skills for ending relationships and gain concrete sense of key questions to ask about the emotional health of a relationship
- Provides a brief supplemental informational session following the guidelines of Erin's Law that raises awareness about abuse and trauma and steps for getting help

Session 4: Decide, Don't Slide

- Introduces self-reflection and "low-risk" versus "high-risk" approaches for decision-making
- Youth practice assessing their own relationship behaviors and attitudes and practice a sequence of "check points" for making healthy relationship decisions

Session 5: Communication and Healthy Relationships

- Builds on healthy communication skills and exploring why it is difficult to communicate in angry state of mind
- Youth practice "take-a-break" skills, conflict resolution, management and problem-solving skills

Session 6: Teens, Technology and Social Media

- Focuses on understanding the impact of "constant connection" and developing personal policies on using social media
- Empowers youth to develop a personal plan for success utilizing knowledge acquired during the program

For those interested in learning more about the Youth Relationship Education supported in local Alabama school systems, review the [Alabama Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Initiative](#) website.

For those interested in setting up their own YRE-focused service-learning course, the [AHMREI Service Learning Course for Youth Relationship Education: Lessons Learned](#) document is a helpful tool.

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