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Sociology

Making connections: service learning and academic success

Course Description

I targeted Sociological Imagination, a core course for the liberal arts and sciences. This is an introductory course to sociology and I use a textbook supplemented by a book by Malcolm Gladwell, entitled *Outliers*, and weekly readings from academic journals and primary sources. The goal of the course is to expose students, primarily first and second year undergraduates, to key concepts and ideas in the social sciences from a sociological perspective. Normally, I have between 35-40 students in this course. However, this semester I taught two sections and the size varied from 35 in one section to 10 in the other section.

The smaller section was restricted to Bonner Scholar students but in the end included a few additional students interested in doing service learning who were not Bonner Scholars. The primary purpose of choosing this course was twofold: First, the University was interested in implementing a service learning option for undergraduates (Sociological Imagination was ideal because it fulfills a core requirement and typically attracts students from various disciplines). Second, because Sociological Imagination is a survey course, it covers a number of topics that can readily be applied to various “service sites” where students might decide to do their service learning.

Issues Addressed

One of the primary issues I wanted to address in this course was whether or not students who integrate course material with service learning experiences perform better and have more positive experiences in a course than students enrolled in a similar class without the service learning component.

While sociology tends to lend itself to the interpretive process of understanding life experiences, it often comes across as disconnected and abstract when students attempt to relate it to their own lives. Service learning is an attempt to make a better connection between experiences outside the classroom with material in the classroom, thereby bringing students lives in to the classroom. There is a significant amount of research on service learning and its role in making learning more experiential and the effects of it on the learning process. Students who participate in classes that have a service-learning component are more likely to be engaged in their communities and do better academically than students not taking courses with a service-learning component (Gallini and Moely (2003)). Lastly, they also feel more positive about their education in general and a strong sense of belonging that enhances their own education (Schuh, Andreas, and Strange, 1991).

New Course Goals

The most important change in goals was in the service-learning section of the course. Given the central role that service learning would play in this course, I had to restructure some of the course in a way that allowed students to discuss their work at their service sites in the class. This meant that the goals in the service-learning course would prioritize experiential learning while the goals in the traditional course would prioritize non-experiential learning.

Methodological Changes to Course [SEE ATTACHED FOR ASSIGNMENTS]

In the service-learning course, I eliminated the “response paper” that I usually require for students to take in this course. The traditional course still had this requirement. Instead, I set aside one day per week where students would bring “reflection papers” on their sites and discuss with the class how their various sites related to course material. I also had the service-learning students do a number of assignments connected to their sites, such as completing an evaluation of their site and having their supervisors evaluate their performance.

I used two methods for capturing variations in experiences and performance across classes. First, I did a basic comparison of grades based on assignments, participation, and quizzes/tests. Second, I administered a survey on the last day of class [SEE ATTACHED]. This survey was used to compare differences in study time, beliefs about the importance of the class to their lives and society, and how likely they are to take another sociology course. The goal was to capture both the academic impact of being involved in a service-learning course and relative differences in “closeness” to course material (how important it is to them, society, etc...).

Outcomes

In short, there were large qualitative differences in terms of class dynamics. The service-learning course students were on a daily basis more engaged, more likely to comment on course material, and less likely to miss class. In part, some of this is likely due to the smaller class size, but I have taught similarly sized introductory sociology courses and the differences were still apparent. Furthermore, grades were higher on average in the service-learning course. Lastly, results from the in-class survey show that students in the service-learning course also: studied more hours per week on average; had higher grades; had more positive experiences with the class; felt sociology was important for understanding their own lives and the world around them; and were more likely to say they would take another sociology course in the future.

Lessons

I was a little surprised at how much more important the course was to students in the service-learning section. I assumed it would be more important, but survey results and grades suggest it was far more than just a little more important to them than the students in the traditional course. Interestingly, the students in the service-learning course were much less interested in the subject at the beginning of the course than the traditional course. In the end however, they showed more interest in the subject than students in the traditional course. I would like to develop the course by integrating more service-learning literature in to the curriculum. At present, I assigned the same readings to both sections with only a couple of variations. I suspect that the incorporation of service-learning readings in the course will strengthen the connection to the material that students already have in the service-learning course.

New Directions

One direction I would like to go would be to encourage a more institutionalized form of service learning at the University level. Without a “center for service-learning” or some centralized “source” for students, any service learning component to a course will be largely piecemeal and dependent upon faculty who have the time or interest in expending vast amounts of energy developing and maintaining a course with a service learning-component. It is highly unlikely that a model without University support would last long. More importantly, the results from this class suggest that service-learning is beneficial to not just students, but also the University. Students who feel close to their schools are more likely to encourage others to attend, more likely to hire future graduates, and more likely to donate when asked.

Bibliography

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