

## COMMENTARY

# ▲ Service Learning Is a Perfect Fit for Occupational and Physical Therapy Education

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Service learning provides invaluable contributions to the education of occupational and physical therapy students by allowing them to contribute to the community while simultaneously optimizing their professional preparation. This report explores the application of five principles in occupational and physical therapy service-learning experiences: placement quality, application between classroom and community, reflection, diversity, and listening to the community's voice. *J Allied Health* 2005; 34:47-50.

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SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY is routinely included in mission statements of most universities, colleges, and allied health departments. At the University of Oklahoma, we work with occupational and physical therapy students to actualize these ideals through course projects at homeless shelters, the Salvation Army, correctional facilities, a children's home, an adult daycare facility, a nonprofit alcohol and drug treatment facility, a residence for individuals with human immunodeficiency virus, a sheltered workshop, a group home, and an after-school program for at-risk youth. By exploring occupational and physical needs and implementing interventions at these facilities and others, we find that we not only contribute to our communities but also simultaneously optimize the professional preparation of our physical and occupational therapy students.

Service learning blends academic learning and service to the community with reflection to yield deep appreciations of one's discipline and civic responsibilities.<sup>1,2</sup> This dual focus differentiates service learning from volunteerism and traditional clinical fieldwork. Service learning moves stu-

dents from the classroom into the community to work with underserved populations, resulting in enhanced critical reasoning, personal and interpersonal development, understanding and application of core knowledge, reflective practice, and citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Service learning, we have found, makes invaluable contributions to occupational and physical therapy education.

Service, after all, is the *raison d'être* of both professions. Physical therapy provides "services to patients/clients who have impairments, functional limitations, disabilities, or changes in physical function and health status resulting from injury, disease, or other causes."<sup>4</sup> Occupational therapy is "the art and science of helping people do the day-to-day activities that are important and meaningful to their health and well-being through engagement in valued occupations."<sup>5</sup> Service learning prepares students to deal with these professional challenges in ways that traditional education cannot.

Researchers have identified five fundamental elements in effective service learning: placement quality, application between classroom and community, reflection, diversity, and listening to the community's voice.<sup>3,6-8</sup> This report explores application of these principles in occupational and physical therapy service-learning experiences.

### Placement Quality

Two early tasks in creating effective service learning are determining criteria for community partners and building alliances with them. Gugerty and Swezey<sup>9</sup> wrote, "How an institution approaches or enters into a community is crucial to the long-term success and sustainability of service-learning programs. Having inclusive representation throughout the process and being clear on goals, responsibilities, and definitions builds trust and encourages lasting relationships."

We have found these criteria for community partners to be productive for our occupational and physical therapy students.

- Services are delivered to diverse populations, enabling students to work with individuals not typically encountered in classrooms, social circles, or traditional, for-profit health care systems.

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- Opportunities are available for students to experience leadership roles in program planning and interaction with clients.
- Students can interact with clients with significant issues that challenge problem-solving skills.

Our goal has been to establish durable, win-win relationships with community partners. Organizing and maintaining this type of affiliation requires considerable face-to-face contact and follow-up. Time must be allotted to meet community partners' administrators and clients, to ask questions and gain understanding of missions and methods, and to allow them to ask similar questions of us. Debriefing at the conclusion of service-learning cycles is also important. We ask the following questions: How did our students do? Did their projects meet your needs? Is there anything we can do differently next time? Has working with us been convenient for you?

Careful consideration of criteria, coupled with thoughtful initiation and management of relationships, helps assure the quality of service learning for both students and partners.

### Application: What Do Students Learn?

Before service learning can be fully embraced as a core component of professional curricula, proponents must show evidence that it results in actual learning. Eyler and Giles<sup>3</sup> described learning as a process that prepares students to understand the environment around them. Information that is grounded in an environmental context forces the learner to synthesize rather than compartmentalize. According to Seifer,<sup>10</sup> "Students involved in service learning are expected to not only provide direct community service but also to learn about the context in which the service is provided, the connection between the service and their academic coursework, and their roles as future health care providers."

Traditional classroom education can lead students to expect that even the most difficult problem can be solved once theory and factual knowledge are adequately understood. A subtle disconnect can develop between what students "know" and the reality students "see" around them. Immersion in the community via service learning forces allied health students to grapple with complex questions concerning inequities in the distribution of health care resources or how to best prepare clients to live and function in their desired environments. This encourages them to move beyond goals of "fixing" complex community issues toward understanding that change will be more effective if it comes from within the community. Seifer<sup>10</sup> affirmed, "Students are learning about the community's strengths and needs, and they are learning that people in these communities are very well aware of their own needs."

Inclusion of community-based projects in a curriculum is not an automatic guarantee that students will benefit from these experiences. Impassioned participation is essential to

transform service learning from merely a required performance to a personal connection between students and community. In their first semester, our entry-level occupational and physical therapy students seek out an individual from the community and spend the semester identifying and then engaging in community-based activities that the partner values and finds meaningful. Feedback from our students engaged in service-learning projects indicates that they are able, and indeed eager, to allow this transformation to occur.

- "[This] has changed my perspective on so many things. I hope to always remember the powerful effect that each one of us can have on another's life simply by being there."
- "Even the smallest act of just listening to someone or doing something to pay attention to their needs can make more of a difference than we may ever know."
- "Our goals must be common for them to [ever] be fully achieved."

These statements provide ample evidence that service-learning projects can teach valuable lessons to our students. These lessons will directly influence how they practice and interact with their community as therapists.

### Reflection

Reflection is a critical component of our service-learning experiences. We engage students in thinking about (1) what it would be like to provide services in the community, (2) what they experienced during their community experiences, and (3) the impact of these experiences on their practice of occupational or physical therapy. Silcox<sup>11</sup> suggested that the reflection process "engages the individual in a cycle of thought and action based on experience, introspection, shared and examined analysis, and finally synthesis." Therefore, during the reflection process, instructors act as guides for students rather than conveyors of knowledge. Helping students to acquire abilities to critically reflect is important for occupational and physical therapy programs, because it has been associated with expert clinical reasoning.<sup>12</sup> We utilize a variety of activities to help students derive meaning and knowledge from service learning. We use class discussions before and after community experiences. Journal writing with probing questions from faculty has been another successful reflection tool. We also utilize bulletin-board discussions on the Internet. A more inclusive list of reflection ideas can be accessed at <http://www.compact.org>.

Supporting a childcare facility is one service-learning experience in our curriculum. Our students chose a childcare setting and spent 15 hours observing and acting as a volunteer. The intent of this experience is to foster appreciation for typical pediatric environments so students could succeed at supporting a child with a disability in these environments. Despite prior in-depth classroom discussion about the importance of natural environments and natural

learning opportunities, two students presented how service learning finally changed their views.

- "Then it hit me. I realized how every little activity like hanging on a basketball rim is a natural learning experience. I thought to myself what I would do if one of the children had a disability and was in a wheelchair."
- "I can't think of another class that has so fundamentally changed my way of viewing the world. I was an early education major for a year and a half, and I took Educating Exceptional Children where I learned about disabilities and developmental delays and how to utilize a resource room and an IEP so 'these' children can learn 'life skills' and 'get a job someday' doing some mundane task that no one else would want to do because 'they enjoy these types of activities.' I can't BELIEVE that I took a class that taught me to look at people as labels and categories, to not even treat them as human beings with feelings and dreams. And I didn't even think twice about it before now."

## Diversity

Traditional classroom-based education can create a wall of academic isolation that separates students from the world around them. Service learning lowers this barrier through immersion within the community. The transformative nature of service learning goes well beyond merely providing opportunities to put theory into practice. It provides students with a chance to experience the community from within, as seen through the unique viewpoint of persons with different experiences, backgrounds, cultures, and attitudes. After completing a service-learning project in a rural setting designed to address concerns of tribal elders about the low rate of immunizations in the Native American population, one student remarked that his community experiences did more to help him realize how we are alike than to highlight possible differences. Another commented that the environment she visited was very new to her and she had to work hard to learn how to adjust and react to individuals who were very different from her. The words of these students show their abilities to understand that among our differences, there is a commonality to the needs, wants, and desires of every individual.

The impact that diversity has on students is influenced by how broadly the term "diversity" is defined in service learning. Jacques<sup>15</sup> cautioned that if service learning is to become a force for curricular reform instead of just another social service, service-learning programs must "transcend socioeconomic boundaries." If students are to deepen their understandings of diversity, differences of all kinds must be experienced and appreciated. Diversity means much more than just working with persons of different races, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. Leaving the campus cocoon to interact with community partners on their own turf contributes to a radical shift in students' perceptions of

their professional roles. Eyler and Giles<sup>3</sup> found "diversity [in service-learning] was a predictor that students would report that they 'learned to think about social issues in new ways' and that students would be increasingly concerned with social justice."

Service learning differs from many community-based projects where students, as benevolent experts, select and provide services, as if any service that provides a learning opportunity automatically benefits the community. These projects diminish the importance of the community's culture, implying that we "experts" are more capable than the community to determine which needs exist and how these needs should be met. Carefully designed service-learning projects more accurately reflect the student's true role as a partner who is invited to work with the community. These projects emphasize an attitude of shared knowledge between equals. Participating in an ongoing visitation project to build rapport between students and individuals from the community led one student to comment that she learned to listen to people and understand what was important to them, however simple or complex it may be. Eyler and Giles<sup>3</sup> believed this subtle but powerful change in focus fosters increased respect and appreciation for the culture of others.

## Hearing the Voice of the Community

An important benefit of service learning is helping students understand the person, within real contexts, engaged in everyday events. During our service-learning experiences, students interact with systems in the community that support people with and without disabilities. Students gain appreciation for complexity as they learn to gather information that impacts a person's ability to successfully participate. This is an important skill for both occupational and physical therapists because success of therapy often relies on how applicable interventions, supports, and goals are to clients' lives. Predominately occupational therapy and physical therapy curricula focus on disability rather than who the person is within the family and community. Service learning teaches students to listen to the community, rather than just "doing" things to recipients of service. Service learning creates a venue to learn more about the community by hearing these voices.

The voice of the community has been defined as the needs expressed by the community.<sup>5</sup> Unlike clinical questions requiring one-sentence responses, gathering information in the community entails listening to needs and desires of all stakeholders. For example, in a shelter for homeless individuals, students must engage administration, clients, and those providing services in the needs assessment process. During the process of hearing and understanding the community voice, we encourage students to gather information on the community's physical environment, the availability and types of social opportunities, and the community's values and beliefs. We ask students to clarify the community voice by recognizing their own beliefs as to

what should occur in the setting. One occupational therapy student, after working with low-income, single mothers to identify educational interests and opportunities, commented, "The main thing I learned from this community assignment is in order to be effective, one has to get to the real issue, not what we think is the issue or want the issue to be." Although students describe feeling initially overwhelmed by information gathered, most describe the process of discerning the community voice as invaluable in preparing them to be stronger practitioners.

### Conclusions

We believe that occupational and physical therapy curricula are incomplete without recursive and frequent service-learning experiences. Zlotkowski<sup>2</sup> wrote that service learning rewards students (and faculty) with enhanced understanding of their disciplines; development of leadership skills, group skills, and team-building skills; and an enhanced appreciation of diversity. We have witnessed and experienced this in our classes. Students' preconceptions fall away because service learning allows them to view professional roles in entirely new ways. As occupational and physical therapy students encounter community challenges and apply their considerable skills and unique visions within their communities, they will become therapists who will broaden current contexts of practice.

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