

Collaboration with Community Partners: Engaging Teacher Candidates

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ABSTRACT. Two social studies methods instructors created an assignment that places teacher candidates in leadership roles in partnerships with community organizations to plan and implement projects to increase student learning. This article outlines the project requirements, past project results, and student reflections of the collaborative effort. It provides evidence of the success and effectiveness of collaborative projects at increasing student learning, providing opportunities for leadership, and challenging students to become involved in community issues.

Keywords: collaboration, community partners, social studies methods

[AQ1: We moved several paragraphs around to make the flow of the article easier to follow. Is it okay as is?]

After the events of 9/11, interesting phenomena occurred in the town where the first author lived. Prior to the attacks, the local high school (whose mascot is the Rebel) had regular Friday night parades of trucks flying Confederate flags on their way to football games. It was quite common to see the Confederate flag throughout the city. After 9/11, more and more U.S. flags began replacing the symbol of the Confederacy. A sense of community and cohesiveness occurred in the aftermath of the devastation. In this town, there had always been a mentality of “the South will rise again.” It took an act of terrible destruction to discount differences and forge a sense of unity with people from all over the country.

Teacher candidates are told this story each semester to deliver this message: Having students collaborate to reach a common goal helps them discard perceptions of differences and increases acceptance among group members. With this goal as a motivating factor, the first two authors have created a collaboration project that places teacher candidates in leadership roles in partnerships with organizations in the community to plan and implement projects to increase student learning. The collaboration project is also a by-product of the “Quality Enhancement Plan” in place at our university, which stresses actively engaging students and encouraging them to recognize their obligations as educated citizens.

Although many of our teacher candidates have been involved in community projects, the majority of them have not taken a leadership role in coordinating such projects or in connecting the projects to student learning. It is with this in mind that we developed the collaboration project for our elementary social studies methods teacher candidates. We believe that engagement in intellectual, social, cultural, and leadership activities will increase student learning, help teacher candidates develop a sense of their obligations as educated citizens, cultivate in teacher candidates a perspective that will serve them throughout their lives, and encourage them to reflect upon and transform thinking about current social, political, racial, or cultural issues.

Research and Service Learning

Marilynne Boyle-Baise (2005) projected that service learning in a multicultural environment would provide opportunities for students to identify assets and needs and gain cultural knowledge of communities other than their own. When teacher candidates engage in service learning, they are encouraged to learn about the community and their students' diverse, multicultural environments. They are influenced to tolerate and accept the differences in people, pressed to go beyond the boundaries they have set for themselves, and pushed to see people and the world from a fresh and enlightened perspective. Rahima Wade (2001) [AQ2: Should this be 2000? There is no Wade 2001 in reference section.] advocated for service learning experiences in diverse communities as a way to challenge teacher candidates to reflect on their assumptions, prejudices, or beliefs about students of color and to develop more positive views toward the diverse youth they will be expected to teach. This is particularly relevant to our social studies

methods classes, given that the majority (95 percent) of our elementary education majors are white females who are mostly from rural or suburban settings.

There are some critics of service learning projects. Learning in Deed (1991) released a report sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation containing information about perceptions of service learning gathered from media reports and focus groups with parents and teachers. The foundation reported that parents' concerns included time taken away from classroom learning and the exposure of young people to social issues they are not equipped to handle. Others debated whether service learning only provided cheap labor for nonprofit organizations. The report showed that some teachers saw service learning as a burden, particularly if it was mandated by the curriculum. The foundation suggested that most criticisms were based on misperceptions and that parents and teachers generally supported service learning when they were educated about its purpose.

Service learning projects have been conducted in a variety of ways. Dora W. Chen (2004) suggested four phases: having teacher candidates relate standards to the project and develop concepts to be taught, researching the community organizations, designing a meaningful project that involves children in decision making, and reflecting on the experience. Wade (2003) also advocated that teacher candidates research community organizations to find one whose goals they can support. The teacher candidates involved in this project researched community organizations and included reflections about their leadership roles.

Julie Anne Taylor and Mary Trepanier-Street (2007) concluded from their research project with the Jumpstart Program that students want to participate in organized, collaborative work. Moreover, they found that community service furthers the

civic development of young people; if that is the case, then educators should consider the inclusion of such projects throughout elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Characteristics of Our Project

Most of our teacher candidates were not strangers to service learning projects. Many of them had participated in community service projects throughout their high school years. Others belonged to sororities or fraternities that implemented a service component as part of their membership requirements. As one teacher candidate noted, “I was really involved in community service learning projects during my high school years, but I have cut back drastically during my college years.” **[AQ3: Where did this quote come from? An evaluation form? The reflections? Pls. change so that sentence reads something like “As one teacher candidate noted in her postproject reflection....” There are quotes from teacher candidates throughout the article, and it’s unclear where they came from (reflections, interviews, informal comments made to the professors, class evaluation forms, etc.) Pls. clarify in each case, or if all of the comments are from the teacher candidates’ reflections, make a statement here that lets the reader know that.]**

On the first day of class each semester, teacher candidates are assigned to a group of three to five members and are given guidelines for the collaboration project. The project must be designed so that it uses the collaborative effort of the team and a community partner. The team is responsible for helping with the design of the project, overseeing preparations, and conducting the project. Teacher candidates are required to volunteer in the community for a minimum of five hours, not including the hours of

planning and team meetings. The teacher candidates must document a total of ten hours for the collaboration project. All group members must work together to implement this project, and no project may take place at an organization where a group member is getting paid to work. The project must involve more than helping: Group members should actually carry out an activity or teach a lesson.

Each group meets the first day of class to begin brainstorming ideas for their collaborative projects. Typically, at least one person in each group has worked with or is currently working with a community organization and already has contacts. Teacher candidates are also given the contact information for the **ALIVE [AQ4: If this is an acronym, please provide full name.]** Center in our city (<http://www.alivebg.org>), which monitors community organizations and their needs and gives information for short-term or ongoing volunteer opportunities. Ideas are provided for sample projects, such as:

- assisting with a university-sponsored program that involves children,
- creating a project based on a community event, such as a Civil War reenactment,
- participating in a community service learning project and planning a similar project for students,
- assisting in planning special programs in schools, such as International Night for parents,
- beginning a club at a local elementary school,
- planning lessons for students in an after-school program, or
- planning an activity at a community festival with a group of students.

Each group must document progress in the following ways:

- Write an abstract explaining the project's (1) purpose, (2) scope, and (3) learning goals. The abstract should describe the (1) target audience, (2) team members, and (3) all partners. In addition, it should contain a timeline. The abstract should be between one and two pages long and written in a bulleted format.
- Keep a log of all team meetings (at least three hours). The log should be typed and should document all meeting dates, locations, members present, agenda items, discussions, and decisions. The log should document every member's specific responsibilities. The first page should have contact information for all members and partners. The log should be between two and four pages long and should be in a bulleted format.
- The group must include a sign-in sheet of the actual hours (at least five) working with students. The sign-in sheet must have group member names, times worked, and a verifying signature from the collaboration partner.

Groups are given two weeks to put together an abstract and timeline for their projects and determine the community partner they wish to work with. All projects must have instructor approval before the collaboration effort can go forward. Periodically during the semester, teacher candidates are asked about their project's progress. The completed project is due at the end of the semester.

Results

We collected and documented results of collaboration projects for approximately 500 teacher candidates from four semesters (spring 2006, fall 2006, spring 2007, and fall 2007). Table 1 displays a list of the partner organizations and the number of projects completed with each. The following is a list of projects that teacher candidates designed or created for their students:

- educational games and activities to promote content learning,
- a geography club that met weekly after school,
- an activity for Girl Scout badge acquisition,
- a Global Positioning System (GPS) scavenger hunt at a camp for gifted students,
- a scavenger hunt at a local museum,
- participation in local festivals (Shaker Farm Days, Kentucky Heritage Festival),
and
- raising money for worthy causes (Bowl for Kids Sake sponsored by Big Brothers and Big Sisters).

There were many exciting projects that led to mutual learning opportunities by both the planners and the participants. One annual event in our area is the International Festival, where the area's various communities come together and offer exhibits, dance, food, music, storytelling, and demonstrations. Several collaborative projects involved this festival. One group brought children from Girls, Inc., to visit representatives from each country and get stamps in their passports after answering questions about that country. Another group had their own booth and taught children how to make Native American musical instruments. A third group helped organize a parade to visually represent a country.

Even though this project centered on teacher candidates, it would be quite easy to implement the process with high school students. For example, the second author required a community service learning project in her Organization of Elementary Curriculum class. After researching ideas for a service learning project his students might complete, a vocational education teacher at the high school level found a preschool class in his school district that had storage problems. He invited the preschool teacher to visit his vocational education class and discuss her classroom needs with the students. Afterward, the vocational students decided to make storage bins for the preschool classroom. The high school students visited the classroom, took measurements, and finalized the plans for the storage bins, which were completed and installed in the preschool classroom four months later.

Many of our teacher candidates reported that they were not aware of the organizations that existed in the community before conducting the collaboration project. Like Wade (2003), who found that her students wanted to continue their involvement with community organizations after planning service learning projects, we found that several of our teacher candidates planned to continue working with the organizations. One teacher candidate, fore example, said,

Since going to Girls, Inc., and working with the girls, I am considering going there next semester and exposing myself to a different learning environment on a regular basis so that I will become a more well-rounded teacher.

Reflections

Kentucky Leadership Standards [AQ5: What are these? Is this something the Kentucky Dept. of Education implements? Should the Kentucky Department of Education 2006 citation go here?] require that teachers identify leadership opportunities that enhance student learning, develop and implement a plan for engaging in leadership activities, and use data to evaluate the results of the planned and executed leadership efforts. Boyle-Baise (2005) reported that in many cases service learning projects are preplanned with no leadership requirement for participants. Robbing teacher candidates of opportunities to instigate the projects makes it is possible that service learning will become a one-time requirement and not a valuable connection to the community and a worthy endeavor to continue throughout their careers. One of our collaboration project's purposes is to encourage teacher candidates to perform leadership roles.

Each group member is required to take a leadership role in the collaboration planning and, following the conclusion of the service hours in the community, write a reflection documenting their role and summarizing the project with the following guidelines:

- Describe your leadership role in this project.
- Describe what you learned from the collaboration experience.
- Describe how your thinking has changed about collaboration.
- Describe the impact you perceive this project might have on student learning.
- Describe what you might have done differently.
- Describe future projects that you might develop in your classroom.

John S. O'Connor (2006) reported that student reflections on service learning projects continually express satisfaction with their experience and the difference they made in the community. Likewise, the teacher candidates in this study reflected on the positive gains from the collaborative effort:

I learned that using more heads is better than one. Each person thinks differently, and each group member brought to the table something different. When one person got stuck on an idea and didn't know where to go with it, everyone helped to make it work or modified it so it would.

The collaborative effort was a success. We overcame all of the factors that hindered our chances of developing a successful project, such as personal schedules and obligations. We worked for a common goal and learned from each other.

Often, at the beginning of the planning for the collaboration project, teachers' confidence levels are low, particularly when they are asked to work with diverse students. As Taylor and Trepanier-Street (2007) point out, when students work collaboratively toward a common goal with diverse people, their appreciation of civic values (such as individual rights) increases. Many of the teacher candidates in this study made reference to the diversity they encountered in the community:

Since I came from a very homogeneous town, I didn't have much exposure to people of a race different than my own. After interacting with these children, I realized that they are just like me.

I do not come from a very diverse background, so diversity can be scary for me at times. This project made me realize that all children are the same no matter what color they are. As a result of this project, I will approach my own classroom differently.

I think that too often minority students are stereotyped, even in our education classes. These students were just like any other students I have ever worked with. They all had their occasional difficulties, but they were kind and eager to learn.

A problem that teacher candidates must overcome in a collaboration effort is the coordination of the group members' schedules. Many of the teacher candidates were taking eighteen credit hours of classes, working at part-time jobs, or raising families. As one teacher candidate wrote, "Anytime that you have a group of people working together there are going to be conflicts that must be worked out. In our case, the only conflict seemed to be timing and availability." Time management is a critical skill for the classroom teacher. Through the collaboration project, teacher candidates are forced to examine their schedules and activities to determine the best method for meeting all obligations.

Not all groups collaborated well together. Sometimes leaders clashed and were not willing to compromise, as suggested in the following reflections by some of the teacher candidates:

This collaboration group was not a collaborative group at all; it was a group divided. These members made me feel insignificant, unintelligent, and as if I were a burden on the group.

The thing I wish could have been done differently is to include more of the group in decision making. A few of the group members always thought that their way was the only way and that they always had the best ideas. Sometimes I felt like I was ignored and not listened to.

However, even with the stress of time management and conflicting personalities, all students agreed that the projects were worthwhile.

Teacher candidates develop many skills through the collaboration projects. The projects have the potential to transform students' lives, broaden their worldview, and develop the capacity for leadership. Each student must take the lead in planning a part of the project, contacting community partners, and executing the scheme. The raised confidence levels were apparent in teacher candidates' reflections as they discussed their leadership roles:

This collaboration project definitely taught me a lesson for the future. I realize that this is going to be just like the real world. When I have my first teaching job, I am going to have to communicate and collaborate with the other teachers in my grade level and with many other staff in the school.

I learned that it is just as important to encourage other group members to work effectively on a task as it is to take on responsibilities within the group. It takes patience and hard work to make a project successful. I now know that I can successfully help lead a project in my school community.

This project supported the fact that I am a leader. I learned how rewarding and challenging it is to do a community project with a group of peers. It made it more gratifying to achieve the goals when I had others to celebrate them with.

Conclusion

In our classes, the collaboration projects have been a resounding success and have contributed toward developing students' leadership skills and self-confidence. The community has benefited from partnership with university students. The teacher candidates have benefited from the opportunity to engage in communities outside the classroom in purposeful learning activities that address their capacity and responsibility to contribute to society. As Wade (1997) stated, collaborative service learning programs between public schools and higher education are enriching for everyone involved.

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