

RADFORD UNIVERSITY RESEARCH RELATED TO EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

“What do we know about how RU students change when they participate in experiential education?”

A review of the literature has emphasized that participation in educational experiences that incorporate an experiential component leads to enhanced learning. In the mid-1990s during the time that Radford University had a stand alone Center for Service Learning, Dr. Kathryn Jordan completed research with Radford University students related to, “How College Students Change as a Result of Participation in Service Learning.” This research was published and presented at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in 1994.

In Dr. Jordan’s research, student populations at **both James Madison University and Radford University** were studied. The purpose of the research was to explore four dimensions that the literature maintained students would change on when they participated in experiential education. Students were drawn from classes at both universities that included a service learning component as part of the syllabi. **The dimensions explored included: *knowledge of self; appreciation for diversity; skill development; and civic awareness and citizenship responsibility.*** Each of the dimensions had several subsets of elements included in their definitions.

Knowledge of self - This can be described as self-understanding or insight into self. *It includes a sense of personal worth, confidence, and competence.* Students who develop on the dimension of self knowledge began to understand themselves and had arrived at a conscious set of personal values and beliefs.

Appreciation for diversity - *Diversity within this dimension relates not only to different racial and ethnic backgrounds but also to differences in socio-economic levels, religious and cultural traditions, and by gender.*

When students have respect and an appreciation for diversity, they learn to understand how culture shapes people and how people shape their culture. They can incorporate multiple perspectives in their problem analysis and decision making tasks and they understand how decisions and events impact different cultures.

Skill Development - *Skills development included the knowledge and techniques related to the academic concentration of the student.* However, it also included more universal, general workplace skills that were thought to be enhanced by participation in experiential learning including; *communication, interpersonal, leadership, time management, and organizational skills.*

Civic awareness and citizenship responsibility - This referred to the student/citizen's understanding of the justness of the social institutions. It is related to civic education and described in the book, Rethinking Tradition (Kupiec, 1993). "One of the oldest, most complex and painful tasks of democratic citizenship is to reach conclusions about the justness of those institutions which order our collective life." This process turns out to be gradual for as "Citizens develop, they do not emerge full blown; their capacities are cultivated only through tough, challenging, serious, practical and theoretical education in the democratic arts." Through civic education the students are moved to, "reflect on their lives and careers in ways that allow them to integrate their concerns with larger arenas of governance and policy, and help them understand and develop their capacities to act effectively in such areas as well as their everyday environment." (Rethinking Tradition, Kupiec, 1993, 62, 63 & 66)

During this Radford University related research both quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed to understand the students' change on the dimensions described above. Students were given a pre-test and post-test questionnaire before and after participation in a service learning class assignment for the quantitative analysis. In addition, the students responded to structured journal questions each week throughout the service learning. The reflective journaling was used for the qualitative analysis.

During the quantitative analysis of the pre-test and post-test questionnaire, the results did not indicate there had been significant change on the dimensions after participation in a service-learning component. **However, there were significant changes on the dimensions as found in the scoring of the qualitative reflective journaling.** Students mentioned frequently their changes on these dimensions in their writings. A multiple reader strategy was employed to read the journals and notate both the quantity and quality of the students' expressions of change on each of the dimensions.

Conclusions of the research were that for quantitative changes to be measured, students needed to be exposed to a longer and/or more intense immersion-type experience than was found in the service learning requirements that were part of these classes. In the case of this research, the students studied at Radford University and James Madison University spent less than 30 hours (6 weeks with 2 to 3 hours a week) during the semester working in a non-profit environment. Our conclusion was that it takes longer than 30 hours of participation with an issue for a student to reflect significant quantitative change on the dimensions

However, in the qualitative research there was substantiation that the students described changes in attitude and knowledge that were anticipated from the literature review on these dimensions of student growth and development. The interpretation of these results was that change had begun during the class, but it was part of a gradual developmental process.

“What were the conclusions to this research with Radford University students?”

We know that students do change on these dimensions of growth when they participate in service learning, a form of experiential education.

The written responses of the students in the reflective journals gave an indication of the increasing levels of knowledge of self, appreciation for diversity, skill development, and civic awareness and citizenship responsibility. This conclusion was reached based on both the frequency and quality of the student statements about the dimensions of growth during the service learning experience. This conclusion is limited by the fact that the journals contained self reported changes in attitudes. It is impossible to conclude from this research if the students would translate their changes in attitude to behavioral changes.

A recommendation of the research was that the pre-test and post-test instrument created would need additional development because there were only four levels of responses for the students to respond. If the changes were more subtle and/or smaller then perhaps additional levels of answers were necessary.

Additionally, the student populations at both James Madison University and Radford University at the time of the study were predominately white and traditionally aged students. Experiential education and service learning may have a very different impact on students who begin the service experience with totally different personal histories.

Another recommendation was that it is important to change the length of time involved in the service learning/experiential education experience. The amount of exposure a student receives in a six-week service experience was a factor in the ability of the pre-test/ post-test instrument to illuminate significant change on the dimensions of growth.

As Chickering in Education and Identity (1969) pointed out, beliefs may shift toward increased liberalism during the college experience. However, these changes involve limited movement, not dramatic conversion.

”The most significant contribution a college can make is to increase the role of values in the lives of its students rather than to modify the content. Movement toward integrity, toward increased congruence between behavior and values—whatever their content may involve three sequential, but overlapping stages: (1) humanizing values, (2) personalizing values, and (3) developing congruence” (p. 127)

The qualitative research results did illustrate the students believed they had increased their respect for diversity, their knowledge of self, civic awareness, and they developed new skills. Secondly, the quality of the statements contained in the written reflections pointed to the importance of processing the service learning experiences. Finally, it is very possible that service learning experiences are cumulative as is other learning. It is possible that to encourage developmental change, educators should require a series of service learning assignments. These assignments should be combined with quality reflection and experienced over time to create a significant impact on college students.