Impact of a Pre-Service-Learning Training on Students’ Skills Needed to Deliver Pre-Packaged Educational Curricula in the Community

Natalie K. Cooke, PhD, Anne K. Pursifull, Kerry M. Jones, and L. Suzanne Goodell, PhD, RD

Background

• Service-learning (SL) combines academic learning, relevant service in the community, and critical reflection. It can be mutually beneficial, providing students with experience and community partners a source of volunteers.
• To be beneficial to community partners, students need to be adequately trained. Therefore, skills-based training needs to be integrated into SL courses.
• We developed a community nutrition SL course with a two-part SL experience: (1) the pre-SL training and (2) the SL experience.
• Previous research determined that the SL course as a whole significantly improves students’ self-efficacy (SE) in teaching nutrition to the community. In this study, we sought to determine the impact of the pre-SL training program on students’ SE in teaching nutrition in a community-based setting.

Course Design

Share Our Strength
Cooking Matters
Inter-Faith Food Shuttle
A PACKed Kitchen

The Cooking Matters curricula are nationally-recognized and were developed by Share Our Strength to teach community members how to make healthier choices and prepare affordable meals.

Community Nutrition Course Structure

Lecture Topics
Food & Culture, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Behavior Change Models, and Educational Design

Pre-SL Training Program (7 weeks)

Service-Learning Experience (6 weeks)
Team-teach Cooking Matters course at community partner sites

Layered Learning Activities

Introduction concepts for skill building
Iron Chef Challenge, Gold Standards Video, Conflict Management, Facilitated Dialogue, Supplies Inventory

Layered Learning Activities

Help guide students in developing skills
Cooking Matters At-A-Glance Lesson Planning, Lesson Plan Outlines, Grocery Store Budgeting

Collective Activities

Allow students to apply and improve skills
Knife Skills Evaluation, Mini Mock Lesson, Shopping Matters Lesson, Mock Lesson

Methods

Participants and Recruitment
12 of the 19 students in the Fall 2013 Community Nutrition class

Data Collection
Interviewer received rigorous, standardized multi-phase interviewer training and used a standard interview guide
Students were asked about each training week’s major activities, how the activities allowed them to build skills, and how the activities benefited them in the community

Data Analysis
Conducted initial analysis before transcribing interviews verbatim
Developed coding manual with 26 activity and skill-specific codes
Two coders independently coded all transcripts, and consulted with a third researcher, coming to consensus on all codes
Three researchers independently analyzed quotes from coding categories, determining two dominant emergent themes

Results

Theme 1: Layered learning activities facilitate skill building
Students said they gained teaching, discipline-specific and interpersonal relationship skills from the pre-SL training program.
The course structure integrated the four sources of self-efficacy.

Theme 2: A stressful, yet supportive, environment facilitates growth
Certain activities were seen to be stressful but also very beneficial in preparing students for the SL experience.
Students endured the rigor of the training program with the help of their teammates, feedback from others, and critical reflection.

Discussion

Layered learning activities are an effective structure to guide students in gradually developing and improving skills. The basic layer provides students with information, and the following layers provide opportunities for application of knowledge, problem solving, and critical thinking.
A rigorous program is necessary to fuel skill building. A certain level of productive “eustress” is necessary for students to perform at an optimum level.
Pre-SL training programs can prepare students for their SL experience by giving them practice experiences, developing their skillsets, and increasing their self-efficacy in those skills.

Future Work
Future interviews with community participants could determine how prepared they thought students were to teach.
A validated, quantitative self-efficacy survey could be used to measure the effectiveness of this training program structure and compare it to other programs.

Limitations
The sample was a small, volunteer sample, so there might be something different about students who did not participate. To encourage participation, we provided an incentive.
This is a small case, so results may not be generalizable to all service-learning training programs.

References:

Acknowledgements: The students from the Fall 2013 community nutrition class who participated in the study, the community partners who allowed the students to teach in their organizations, the community partners who participated in the survey, and the community partners who helped make the training program successful.