Back to the Basics: Service Learning and Asian American Studies

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Service-learning continues to be a point of increasing interest and promise to educators. It is of particularly relevant value to higher education institutions embedded in an urban context that seek to partner with public schools in the midst of reform. The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is such a campus, that has historically placed due emphasis on forging and strengthening links with the surrounding community. This paper describes a pilot study that strives to answer the question what impact does service-learning in Asian American Studies have on Philadelphia school reform? Last spring, Penn’s Asian American Studies Program and Pan-Asian American Community House partnered with two local community schools, Philadelphia’s Franklin Learning Center High School and the Alexander Wilson Elementary School. The strategic academically based Asian American Studies service-learning course enrolled both high school and college students. It was designed to foster structural community improvement in the Alexander Wilson Elementary School (Benson & Harkavy, 1996). In addition to serving as a reform mechanism for a Philadelphia public school, the course strived to cultivate a heightened sense of civic awareness and responsibility for college students, while concurrently providing an enabling, safe space of intellectual and emotional encouragement for the high school students enrolled in the course. Together, the high school and college students facilitated Asian American Studies lessons in the Alexander Wilson Elementary School using cooperative learning teams to promote cross race friendships (Clark, 1985). The course culminated with high school and college students creating change projects designed to address issues impacting Asian Americans in urban schools.


**Introduction**

“If we would teach our students to care about important social problems, and think about them rigorously, then clearly our institutions of learning must set a high example in the conduct of their own affairs. In addition to responding to its students, a university must examine its social responsibilities if it wishes to acquire an adequate understanding of its proper role and purpose in present-day society” (Bok, 1982)

Former Harvard University President Derek Bok has urged institutions of higher education to exercise a moral mindfulness regarding their educational mission and larger sense of purpose. Today, over two decades later, Bok’s call remains an important and timely one. The risk for American colleges and universities to become self-absorbed, isolated from larger society, and engaged in research considered esoteric is an unfortunate and apparent one. This risk has pushed educators like Bok and, more recently, the University of Pennsylvania’s Ira Harkavy, to call for the integration of problem-driven, community-centric service-learning initiatives into the landscape of higher education (Harkavy, 1993; Benson et.al., 2000).

Service-learning is an academic tool of significant interest and promise. By definition its aim is to offer an “experience in which students participate in an organized service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996). Proponents of service-learning argue against the current emphasis on vocational training pervasive throughout college campuses. They promote the value community-university collaborations offer not only within the context of individual development and learning, but toward the furthering of aggregate knowledge and human welfare.

Service leaning can trace its roots back to the sixties and seventies, when the push to empower neglected communities was a forceful one. Notably, Ethnic Studies, also born during that period, is credited with demanding an increased community say in education. Further, the reallocation of university resources to more directly encourage social justice has historically been advocated by Ethnic Studies as being necessary. Community-based service-learning has provided a cornerstone in the pioneering vision of Asian American Studies in particular. Writes Glenn Omatsu of this:

“Thirty years ago, the founding vision of Asian American Studies emphasized a critical link between learning about society and changing it. Education was defined as not merely imparting information to students but promoting critical awareness and encouraging political engagement” (Omatsu, 1999).

The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is such a campus, that has historically placed due emphasis on forging and strengthening links with the surrounding community. “Three decades ago, Asian American Studies emerged from the fire of student and community activism that was itself connected to larger social movements seeking to transform all aspects of society” (Omatsu, 1999). In line with the founding vision of Asian American
Studies, Penn’s Asian American Studies program strives to offer service-learning opportunities for its students.

The strategic academically based Asian American Studies service-learning course enrolled both high school and college students. It was designed to foster structural community improvement in the Alexander Wilson Elementary School and the Franklin Learning Center High School (Benson & Harkavy, 1996). In addition to serving as a reform mechanism for a Philadelphia public school, the course strived to cultivate a heightened sense of civic awareness and responsibility for college students, while concurrently providing an enabling, safe space of intellectual and emotional encouragement for the high school students enrolled in the course. Together, the high school and college students facilitated Asian American Studies lessons in the Alexander Wilson Elementary School using cooperative learning teams to promote cross race friendships (Clark, 1985). The course culminated with high school and college students creating change projects designed to address issues impacting Asian Americans in urban schools. This paper describes a pilot study that strives to answer the question what impact does service-learning in Asian American Studies have on Philadelphia school reform?

**Research Design**

A two-phase design was conducted developmentally, wherein the first qualitative reflection paper methodology was used sequentially to inform the second qualitative focus group methodology.

Reflection papers were assigned to students after each community service project. The reflection paper data was used to inform the conduct of the second qualitative focus group methodology. According to Astin, Vogelgesang Ikeda, and Yee (2000), reflection is a powerful way to connect the service experience to the academic course material.

Two separate focus groups were conducted. Each focus group had nine participants excluding the moderator. One focus group was comprised of high school students ranging from grades 9-12. The second focus group was comprised of Penn students at different stages in their academic career and from a variety of academic disciplines. The naturalistic conditions associated with the conduct of this research disallowed the random assignment of students to experimental treatment groups and nontreatment control groups (Babbie, 1998, pp. 249-250). Students were asked to respond to the focus groups while they were in their “natural settings” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15), where the “artificiality” of controlled experiments did not confound the results (Babbie, 1998, p. 252).

A purposive, non-probability approach was used for the selection of focus group subjects. The use of multiple groups was consistent with Babbie’s (1998, p. 248) suggestion, and the group sizes were within the range recommended by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 57). The researchers developed a focus protocol using Krueger’s (1994) model of the process of conducting focus groups.
Data was collected from students regarding their experience with service-learning through the Asian American Studies course; therefore this research was conducted at the individual unit of analysis. This unit allowed for summary descriptions of all such individuals, as well as to explain differences and relationships (Babbie, 1998, p. 93). Using qualitative data analysis techniques, the data were examined to explore the impact of service-learning in Asian American Studies on urban school reform. A theory of successful service-learning projects aimed at urban school reform was developed based on the data by following techniques for developing grounded theory.

Using Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory approach, the researcher derived theory from the data. Using this approach, an abstract theory that was grounded in the views of the participants was created. The theory derived involved action, process, and interaction. The grounded theory data analysis steps employed by the researcher included microanalysis such as open coding and axial coding, selective coding, and the presentation of information in tabular form to display the relationships among the categories that emerged in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher used theoretical sampling to identify variations in concepts. Theoretical sampling also served as a tool to facilitate the creation of precise categories according to their properties and dimensions. The researcher conducted sampling by returning to the data to reorganize it according to theoretically relevant concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

At the macro level, the narrative that emerged from the data analysis was illustrated through an impressionist tale that showcases the focus group fieldwork from the point-of-view of the research subjects (Creswell, 1998, p.159). A micro level narrative discussion was conducted through the use of quotes, presenting information in narrative form, and intertwining quotations with the researcher’s interpretations (Creswell, 1998, p.160). The descriptive procedures are consistent with the grounded theory design type utilized by the researcher. According to the grounded theory approach, the narrative outcome will allow theory to emerge. The researcher used theoretical sampling to build theory by “maximiz[ing] opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 201).

In order for qualitative research findings to take the form of theory, categories must be refined and integrated. Selective coding uses integration to organize categories around a core category that represents the main theme of the research. The integration process was facilitated by the techniques of using diagrams and reviewing and sorting through memos. Upon completion of these processes, the theoretical scheme was refined. Validation of the theory occurred by comparing it to the raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
Back to the Basics: Service Learning and the Asian American Community


Last January saw the No Child Left Behind Act become law (No Child Left Behind, 2002). Since then, school systems across the nation have been subject to heightened levels of state accountability. School reform remains a point of heated debate today as community members, educators and the makers of policy struggle not only to define it, but decide how best to approach change.

Such renewed federal commitment to higher K-12 standards of education has meant students are now required to pass state-mandated exams. Under this law, schools with poorly-performing students are given five years to demonstrate considerable levels of progress. Failure to do this will result in an obligatory restructuring of the system (No Child Left Behind, 2002).

Given this, many school districts have extended a hand to for-profit education providers. Still others have elected to engage Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) as a means to quickly meet new state requirements. Philadelphia in particular has captured the nation’s attention by approaching school reform in an ambitious, aggressive manner. John Chubb, chief education officer of the private EMO Edison Schools has explained the need for reform in this city by saying:

“Roughly 60 percent of Philadelphia’s students failed the state’s reading and math exams, and more than a third dropped out of high school. Three-fourths of the city’s schools are identified as low performing, meaning that more than half of a given school’s students are failing” (Chubb, 2002).

Last Spring, Philadelphia’s School Reform Commission (SRC) decided to privatize 75 of the 240 school in the city (Chubb, 2002). It has been difficult to determine what, if any, impact such change has had on student achievement. The demand for critical outcomes assessment remains, as little work has been conducted to determine what has worked both within the district, and at the individual school-level.

The initial large-scale push to privatize education in Philadelphia has called into question the shifting definition of public education. Maia Cucchiara asked in a recent article what the “public purposes of education” have become, wondering whether the “expectation that schools will prepare students to be knowledgeable, competent, responsible citizens” can persist within the context of such privatized “public” schools (Cucchiara, 2003).

Indeed school reform and the integration of service-learning into education systems are often regarded as separate movements. This is unfortunate as service-learning can offer value in the revitalization of school systems. Writes Sarah Pearson of this:

“Service-learning is a powerful tool for reaching both the academic and social objectives of education. It has the potential to reinvigorate the education reform movement by encouraging the creation of a caring community of students to improve the school’s culture and possibly impact our world” (Pearson, 2002)
By fostering intellectual and emotional development, service-learning can offer schools an effective, creative means to deepen students’ learning, a primary goal of the school reform efforts. Based on our preliminary analyses, the use of service-learning in last spring’s Asian American Studies course has managed to do just this.

The course, enrolling both high school and college students, was designed to encourage positive growth at the student, school and community levels. Students attending Philadelphia’s Franklin Learning Center High School and the Alexander Wilson Elementary School, both urban institutions affected by recent Pennsylvania school reform mandates, appear to have gained from their extended interaction with the Penn undergraduates. Specifically, these elementary and high school students have shown signs of considerable intellectual and emotional development over the course of the past semester. The Penn students involved have enhanced their sense of civic responsibility and citizenship over the course of the semester.

Through the integration process of grounded theory design, two central themes detailing the student-centered benefit of service-learning have been uncovered. As indicated previously, grounded theory works to discover what is explicitly emergent from the raw data. These two themes, then, have emerged, not been forced, from the findings.

Analysis of student reflection papers, focus group findings, and personal feedback provided by course enrollees indicates that service-learning has 1). Motivated the students—largely by encouraging their personal growth and 2). Has led to the creation of a more enabling learning environment in the classroom.

“Motivated” students, their personal growth and changing perspectives

Throughout the course, enrolled students were asked to use “reflection paper” assignments as a tool to provide periodic feedback on the classroom experience. Notably, the Franklin Learning Center students detailed reaching new levels of self-awareness and understanding as a result of having taken the course. Wrote one student:

“What I’ve learned about myself...I learned that I’m not (dis)organized as I seem and that when my partners needed help, I didn’t take them down like I thought I would. I’ve become pretty good at working in a team. I know this is important for college courses so I’ll keep working at it.”

Other students expressed similar sentiments, with many suggesting this course offered them a glimpse into higher education-learning. As one student explained:

“I learned I should participate more and ask questions more often I also learned that, if I ever do a group project again, I should be more organized. Taking a college class really has helped me think about what I need to do to be a good student.”
The FLC students then, appear to have come away from the course with heightened levels of personal motivation, and with a collective sense of how to succeed in an advanced course setting. Having shared classroom space with Penn undergraduates seems to have both challenged and encouraged the FLC students. As one student explained in a reflection paper entry:

“I was really nervous to be in a class with Penn students. At first I was like, ‘they are going to be so much smarter than me.’ But I realized that I am smart too and I can do things just like them.”

Still others spoke of building their confidence levels and learning how to be more assertive in the classroom. As one FLC student explained:

“From doing presentations and group work for this class, I learned that I have leadership qualities. I haven’t taken on lots of leadership in school, but I think I can now.”

Another wrote of becoming a better team player stating:

“I learned that I’m able to work with people I don’t know at first. Usually during a group project I work with my friends.”

One young man wrote encouragingly that although this class “was the hardest course I ever took. I think that if I can do this class, I can do anything.” The FLC students, while initially reserved and somewhat intimidated by the Penn students appear to have completed the class with a renewed sense of intellectual confidence and motivation for the future. Students seem to have assumed a considerable level of final project ownership as one student described his assignment by saying:

“I think this research was the hardest research I have ever done. It required many parts and a lot of work. It took up lots of my time but I think it will (lead to) better things in the future.”

At the end of the spring semester, all course enrollees were asked to describe their experience in the class. Within the context of two separate focus groups—one for the Franklin Learning Center high schoolers and another for the Penn students--participants indicated having gained an appreciation for Asian American history and an awareness of difficulties troubling the population throughout that history. One FLC student explained:

“I never really noticed these issues as serious issues. They didn’t appear to be as open to me as they are now, since I’ve done research on this.”

Importantly, Penn students also spoke of change and personal growth as being outcomes of having completed the course. The Penn students’ motivations for enrolling in “Asian American Community Fieldwork in Urban Education” appear to have been multiple. For many, the opportunity to expand one’s viewpoint beyond, in the words of one young woman, “the Penn bubble” was valued. As one student indicated:
“I think this course made me realize a lot about my own background. The Asian Americans I grew up with...all came from pretty strong academic backgrounds (and)...all went to Harvard, MIT and Penn. Going out to these schools in the Philadelphia school district you realize the big disparity between the opportunities available to these students and you...want to reach back out and give (them) an opportunity.”

This sentiment was reiterated by most participants of this session, the desire to “give back” to young members of the Asian American community being expressed strongly. Further, a few Penn respondents indicated this course offered them a view beyond what their others could. Many, students of business, engineering and biology, suggested they came to this course looking for insight into the lives of local area Asian American youth. As one young sophomore business major explained:

“This is the first class I’ve had where there’s been a lot of outside interaction...outside of textbooks. (I hoped to) learn about Asian Americans in actual society, in the education system...to learn about my fellow Asian Americans.”

An encouraging number of these students seem to have come away from the class reinvested in helping larger communities they feel a part of. As one young woman noted:

“I’m in Wharton right now, but I’m interested in education. This course made me realize it is really important to me...to somehow...stay involved in helping the underprivileged members of the Asian American community.”

An upperclassman echoed this saying:

“I was thinking I might actually switch my career. I studied management so I was thinking more banking, but now I’ll probably become a teacher.”

Penn students discussed acquiring a new sensitivity and strength of conviction around the notion that members of underserved youth communities ought to be helped. Importantly, the course appears to have not only reinforced this conviction, but also has helped couple it with a sense of the necessity for individual action. One sophomore woman explained:

“Now I have a stronger inclination to want to do something whereas before I was like ‘Yeah, there’s something wrong, yeah it needs to be fixed.’ (Before) I never really wanted to take an initiative to do anything about it.”

The Franklin Learning Center students also indicated having gained awareness about not only Asian Americans, but other minority communities as well. As one young woman explained, “We didn’t only focus on Asian American Studies. It made us think wider. It’s not just us, other races have problems too.”

Another FLC student expressed a similar sentiment in a course reflection paper, writing:
“I noticed that when I was in class, I learned all different words and meanings and I understand more about Asian American Studies. I never realized that things affected us like that. During this course, I realized that learning with different ethnic backgrounds for me is interesting.”

In this sense, the Franklin students appear to have gained a depth and sensitivity around cross-cultural histories. Over the course of the semester, these students have acquired a greater sense of intellectual confidence, assertiveness in the classroom, and awareness around what it takes to succeed in a college level class. They have been challenged and encouraged by the Penn students they’ve shared a classroom with, sometimes taking the collegians as role models. All indicate they have grown personally, learning about hidden leadership skills, for instance, and how to function effectively in a team setting.

Similarly, the Penn undergraduate course participants describe having attained a renewed sense of commitment to community service and, specifically, to the resolution of issues that hinder Asian American student achievement within some urban school contexts. These older students indicate leaving the class with a sense of urgency around resolving these issues and, importantly, a belief that they can be agents of change.

**Creating an enabling learning environment**

Developing lesson plans for K-12 students that not only teach critical material, but provide real-world application, build character and encourage civic engagement can prove challenging to educators. Service-learning offers a tangible, powerful link between abstract theory and participatory, active learning. Janet Mason of the University of South Carolina believes service-learning acts as a tool particularly useful for involving the “reluctant learner” who might be detached from the learning process (as cited in Pearson, 2002). One Alexander Wilson Elementary School student offers testament to this saying:

“I appreciate the students coming to our classroom. I had a lot of fun making the friendship bracelets. Our group made the coolest jump rope rhyme. I can’t wait to the next time you come. I promise to do my homework. Will you come back soon?”

Another Wilson student, in a reflection letter to the Penn and FLC course participants decided that:

“This was the most fun class I ever had. I wish we could do this all the time. Will you come and visit again?”

The encouragement of learning by engaging students and promoting “fun” seems to have been successful in this case. A second grade teacher at Wilson expands on this by writing:
“The partnership with Penn has been a highlight of my school year. My students get so excited when the high school and college students come to my classroom to supplement our curriculum. It really encourages my students to think critically about subject matter and motivates them to work harder. The high school and college participants have been great role models for my students. It is thrilling to see the excitement in my students’ eyes when the Penn and FLC students walk through the door!”

The Penn students involved in the course expressed similar views. Many felt the class helped not only educate, but inspire and encourage their action. One Penn sophomore who indicates—since taking this course—she is seriously considering a career in teaching, said:

“I think this class brought to light issues with education I was privileged enough to ignore. I went to a private school..(so) finding out about it really effected me.”

Other Penn students also felt this class helped not only teach them about inequalities in the education system, but also stirred in them a desire to help. One man indicated during the Penn focus group session:

“This is the first class I’ve had where there’s been a lot of outside interaction and interaction outside of textbooks. I thought it was cool to have students come in and bring a completely new perspective.”

It seems that for young and older students alike, the service-learning approach to teaching has had its benefits. Course participants have indicated they feel actively engaged with the material they are learning--partly due to the hands-on approach the instructor has taken, and partly as the classroom has provided a safe space for meaningful student-to-student interaction and dialogue.

Summary

This study reports preliminary findings that indicate that service learning participants benefited from a more enabling learning environment. In addition, the findings suggest that the participants were motivated both in an academic and personal sense through the service learning activities. A primary goal of school reform efforts is to deepen students’ learning by fostering intellectual and emotional development. The service learning project discussed in this paper is a mechanism by which schools and community can impact school reform.

We feel there is much that can be gained from the incorporation of service-learning into both K-12 and higher education curricula. By bridging theory and practice, service-learning can promote better schooling opportunities through the boosting of academic, social and civic learning outcomes. “There is a greater need now, more than ever, for education reformers to welcome service-learning as a respected partner in education. Service-learning is gaining recognition among educators, policymakers, foundations and students as a way to connect back to and be a part of the community” (Pearson, 2002).
Limitations

The limitations of this study are typical of most qualitative research. The results from this pilot study are to be treated as preliminary and are intended to inform a more rigorous design of the modes of analysis for a more comprehensive study of the impact of service learning on school reform. Caution should be exercised when interpreting these results or attempting to extrapolate them to other students or programs.

There are obvious limitations associated with the generalizability of the results beyond the confines of this singular research site (Myers, 2000). The small sample size (n=46) also limits the generalizability of the findings of this research. The research may possess sources of bias resulting from respondents self-selecting themselves for participation in this study. The self-report nature of the study may be inaccurate due to insufficient recall and/or uneasiness with self-disclosure. Descriptive and exploratory studies such as this one are often cross-sectional, but exhibit limitations when attempting to establish antecedence assumed in independent-dependent relationships (Babbie, 1998, pp. 100-101; Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 577).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined one of Penn’s Asian American Studies service learning initiatives in its early stages of development. A great deal of insight can be gained from this project. Examining the long-term impact of the project on participants could yield valuable information for practitioners designing similar projects.

In addition to the core themes identified in this paper, several other themes were apparent that warrant further research. Intellectual development, citizenship, and friendship emerged as potential benefits of service learning for participants. The researcher recommends examining these benefits and their impact on school reform. Further research can provide critical information to other educational institutions considering public school partnerships especially in the context of school reform.
Bibliography


