

Graduate Students and Community-Based Learning

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Abstract

This article describes opportunities for graduate students to engage in service-learning and community-based research as emerging scholars. Initiatives at the University of Notre Dame are presented to illustrate potentials. Such community-oriented practices help address recent criticisms about graduate education, and serve to integrate intellectual inquiry with informed practice.

Introduction

Early in this decade, the traditional research-oriented approach to graduate education came under fire. Citing a report published by the Pew Charitable Foundation (Golde & Dore, 2001), Thomas & Lambert (2005) suggest that the “emphasis on research in doctoral training leaves new Ph.D.’s unprepared for faculty responsibilities such as teaching, collegial evaluation, curricular planning, and collaborative effort” (p. 1), and that “new graduates ... appear to lack an understanding of professional ethics and an interest and commitment to community outreach and service, both of which are required by many public and private institutions” (p. 2). Engaging graduate students in community-based educational approaches is an efficient and relevant means to address such concerns.

While service-learning has developed typically within undergraduate education, graduate students demonstrate interest, and some find their way into service-related initiatives. Less common are opportunities to teach using a service-learning pedagogy, or to practice a mode of scholarship that is community driven. Below, employing categories in the experiential learning model of Kolb (1984), we outline ways to provide relevant experiences for graduate students. Doing so will enhance their effectiveness as teachers. Perhaps more importantly, it will ready developing scholars to prepare undergraduates to address social challenges and to employ their own scholarly expertise similarly. Preparing graduate students in this way can also assist in reviving the civic mission of higher education.

From Service-Learning to Community-Based Research

The field and practice of service-learning has expanded over the last two decades, with increased attention to graduate students. Discussions of service-learning can be found in literature on graduate studies in business education, psychology, and, perhaps most prominently, the health fields (e.g., nursing education). For example, Feen-Calligan (2008) describes a graduate course she offers in art therapy—through which students work with individuals who are homeless—while Ethridge (2006) outlines service-learning in teacher education.

A logical extension of service-learning and other forms of engaged pedagogy is community-based research (CBR). CBR is a mode of scholarship that refers (1) to research done at the request of a local community or non-profit non-academic entity, (2) in a manner that significantly involves the community partner in the research process, and (3) with the explicit aim of providing assistance to the participating community. The terminology began to take hold among service-learning practitioners in the 1990s, largely through institutions that received Corporation for National and Community Service funding to further this form of applied research (Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo, & Donohue, 2003). When students (within or outside a course) are engaged in CBR, the research constitutes their service. Such research opportunities are a natural place for engaging graduate students.

A Place for Graduate Students: A Developmental View

The Center for Social Concerns facilitates community-based learning and research at the University of Notre Dame. Among diverse initiatives, the Center provides assistance for faculty to create service-learning courses, engage in CBR, and participate in civic initiatives. But what of graduate students, the next generation of academics? In recent years, we have enhanced efforts to integrate graduate students, building on natural links and working with departments to broaden the vision of graduate education toward civic responsibility within a research university (Checkoway, 2001).

We advocate a developmental grounding for such educational efforts (Brandenberger, 1998); too often service-learning efforts are atheoretical in scope. What follows can be viewed as a developmental cycle of learning about engaged pedagogy and research approaches for graduate students. Here we extend the framework used by Bringle, Hatcher, Jones, and Plater (2006) for faculty development, employing Kolb's (1984) categories of abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, concrete experience, and reflection. While our goal is not to outline a necessary developmental path—there are various starting points and routes that can be followed—Kolb's model suggests key elements for graduate students' understanding of community-based education and scholarship as their academic journeys unfold. We outline important points along the way with illustrations from our own work with graduate students.

Abstract Conceptualization: Intellectual Grounding

A natural starting point for deepening understanding of service-learning and CBR in higher education is at the cognitive intellectual level (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995). Toward this end we offer consulting sessions with a Center for Social Concerns staff member to discuss pedagogy, and opportunities to interact with over 50 local community organizations where students are engaged through course work. The graduate student can also take advantage of a workshop about the pedagogy offered by the University's Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning.

The community-based approach to research can be learned through similar consultation and study. Graduate students are invited to join a faculty learning community that meets regularly on topics pertinent to CBR. The Center's website offers extensive information about CBR as well. An annual research awards dinner attended by over 200 faculty, staff, and community collaborators highlights grant recipients that will be conducting CBR locally the following year. This has served as an ideal moment for graduate students to learn, and ultimately be recognized for, community-based

approaches. The Center helps facilitate two coalitions that also have provided an inroad to graduate students: one facilitates research on education issues facing local public schools, the other helps to mitigate lead hazards in the city.

Active Experimentation: Proposing One's Own Project and the SSLP

No program prompting engaged learning would be limited to the abstract, of course. We present a variety of means for graduate students to begin to engage thoughtfully. The Center's Summer Service Learning Program (SSLP) involves a variety of graduate students annually. The SSLP is a three-credit theology course through which over 200 undergraduates spend eight weeks working and learning at over 50 sites nationally. Graduate students serve as coordinators, reflection leaders, and facilitators, providing an opportunity for mentoring of undergraduates. They also identify readings that will help students prepare for one of 16 types of placements (e.g., AIDS, domestic violence, youth at risk). Students returning from summer engagements typically describe quite powerful, transformative experiences. Through interaction with these undergraduates, graduate students gain considerable insight into the value of engaged pedagogy.

The Center also welcomes graduate students to participate directly in many experiential and service-learning opportunities through the Center, sometimes prompting new research questions they take back to their disciplines. We work with advanced graduate students to propose—in collaboration with departmental colleagues and community members—a community-based learning course in an area of expertise.

Concrete Experience: Course Offerings, Center Seminars, and CBR Projects

Graduate students put into practice and further come to understand pedagogy and methods when they have the concrete experience of offering their own courses. Graduate students who receive a course development grant from the Center follow this route. Three graduate students, for example, were funded to develop and co-teach an interdisciplinary course. A doctoral candidate in moral theology, a masters student in theological studies, and a doctoral student in developmental psychology offered "Identity, Social Ethics, and Psychology" to examine issues of justice and human development within the frameworks of Catholic social thought and psychological research. To augment classroom experience, students worked with local organizations that focus on migration, aging, and race relations.

Another graduate-led course took undergraduates to Guatemala. This sociology course, titled "Globalization, Coffee and the Fair Trade Movement," examined the impact of globalization on people at the world's margins, especially in economically depressed areas of Central America. Students participated in an eight-day cross-cultural trip within Guatemala. A goal of the class was for students to elaborate a plan for promoting fairness and social justice in a particular area of economic exchange and take preliminary steps to implement it.

An additional avenue for graduate students to gain teaching experience in service-learning pedagogy is to work with one of the Center's one-credit Social Concerns Seminars, a set of twenty interdisciplinary courses for which students travel to sites in the U.S. and beyond during fall, winter, and spring breaks. Graduate students provide expertise to existing seminars, and have developed new seminars that the Center then helps facilitate. A doctoral candidate in the Department of Chemical and Biomolecular

Engineering combined forces with an economics and energy studies undergraduate to develop such a class, titled “Energy Policy, the Environment and Social Change”. The course, now in its third year, examines the role of energy in society and the impact of energy usage on the environment. A weeklong immersion in Washington, DC over fall break is a central focus of the overall learning experience.

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, a third year law student from Louisiana came to the Center seeking a means to prompt learning and contribute to the recovery process. With the collaboration of a history professor, she developed and led a one-credit seminar on environmental justice and human rights, through which undergraduates served in New Orleans and examined recovery efforts. The law student currently practices in Louisiana, and remains a contact person for the seminar, which continues as a one-credit offering through the Africana Studies program.

Three \$7000 mini-grants are given annually on a competitive basis to support research done collaboratively by university and community partners to address the community partner’s research question. Graduate students often receive these funds. A graduate student in psychology was given a mini-grant to develop and implement interventions for children with high lead levels residing in lower income neighborhoods of the city. The project was conducted with members of the area’s Lead Alliance coalition. The graduate student has involved undergraduates in her research, acting as a teacher of CBR as well as a researcher herself. This effort became the heart of her dissertation. A sociology graduate student received a grant in conjunction with a local refugee services office. Their work explored ways to enhance job placements for refugees to the area. A graduate student in engineering partnered with Logan Center, an organization serving physically and developmentally challenged individuals. They researched and designed toys that would be especially useful for children with disabilities. With the city’s Center for the Homeless, a sociology graduate student explored underlying causes of the return rate of individuals to the Center’s programs.

Reflective Observation: Multiple Moments

Reflection is a central part of learning, and, of course, experiential learning. Opportunities to reflect on practice likewise add value as graduate students make meaning of their teaching and research engagements. Reflection is interwoven during many of the engagements noted above.

Reflection occurs during faculty learning community sessions. A session on designing and offering CBR courses for undergraduates, for example, offers time for faculty members and graduate students to consider their own practices and address questions of others likewise facing teaching challenges. The annual dinner is also a time of reflection. Attendees include a combination of community collaborators, faculty, staff, and graduate students. They learn about new projects, as the just-selected grantees are announced. They see results of previous studies during a poster session. Consultations also provide opportunities for reflection. Center staff members are available to discuss new strategies, past approaches, and the like whenever a graduate student seeks such assistance.

The method of pastoral theological reflection has been key component in many of the Center’s courses for decades, due to the Center’s long affiliation with the University’s

Department of Theology. In particular, theological reflection is an element of the SSLP. Drawing upon Robert Kinast's model (1999), this method asks students to write about significant aspects from their eight weeks of service, analyze the experience through responses to a series of questions and link their own insights with those from the course readings. To assist the 225 students in the SSLP courses each summer and fall, approximately 15 graduate students in the Masters of Divinity and Masters/PhD in Theological Studies each read eight of the SSLP students' assignments and final papers. The graduate students then facilitate a series of three discussions with the aim of continuing the process of theological reflection and helping students move to action in light of their reflection. As the graduate students assist with the reflection process with the SSLP students, they, too, continue to consider this teaching experience in relationship to their advanced studies in theology.

Further Program Development

Recently we have explored means to deepen our efforts with graduate students at Notre Dame. A first step was to conduct focus groups with a cross-section of students in both professional and doctoral programs. The interest level was high, though students were quick to point out barriers as well: time and funding limitations, warnings from advisors to avoid outside distractions, and disciplinary confines. Salient among their recommendations were the following: 1) provide clear entry points for graduate students via communication with department chairs/advisors and targeted advertising; 2) create both opportunities to engage with undergraduates and graduate-student specific options; 3) significantly expand the number of opportunities to offer a service-learning course and to engage in applied scholarship; and 4) create opportunities during summer when time pressures are lower. As a result of such interest and input, we are now exploring a certificate or fellowship program for graduate students. A model for such is a new Graduate Certificate in Community Engagement at Michigan State University, a partnership between the Graduate School and the office of University Outreach and Engagement there (Fitzgerald, 2009).

Conclusion

Service-learning has developed significantly since the 1970s. Strong evidence documents, especially for undergraduates, the value of this teaching and learning approach. It enables students to apply what they have learned and to transfer understanding to new contexts. It prompts students to rethink stereotypes and challenges their racial understandings (Giles & Eyler, 1999).

Those who have facilitated engaged pedagogies with graduate students report beneficial outcomes as well, including enhanced understanding of content and skill development (Donohoe and Danielson, 2004) as well as increased "commitment to community service" (Wittmer, 2004). Such results are consistent with Sullivan and Rosen's call (2008) for an integration of theoretical and practical reasoning in professional education and beyond. Yet the majority of research to date has focused on undergraduate outcomes. As models for engaged learning and applied scholarship for graduate students are developed, concurrent research should examine relevant processes and impacts. Graduate education follows fairly rigid epistemological pathways, reinforced by disciplinary cultures and faculty mentors trained in didactic modalities. Quality research is needed to hone and build support for alternative models. Such research should begin with quality assessment of learning outcomes germane to graduate

education, including how well graduate students contributed to the teaching/learning missions inherent to service-learning, and how well they linked engagements to relevant scholarship within their respective disciplines.

A Carnegie Foundation report (Golde & Dore, 2001) on doctoral education recommends that graduate education “inculcate values and ethics in future faculty” and “encourage students to learn about academic citizenship ... and application of expertise to the community” (p. 5). While it is essential to master disciplinary context during graduate study, scholars in many fields increasingly realize that knowledge cannot be separated from context, and that it is important to learn “what to do” with knowledge and understanding (Sullivan and Rosin, 2008). Teaching and scholarship that integrate a community-based orientation provide an important means to advance such goals in any graduate discipline.

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