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Spreading the Word: Service Learning in a Media Literacy Course

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Abstract:

Proliferating media and other digital tools have created a landscape that beckons children and adolescents as consumers and producers. It is imperative that young people develop knowledge and skills to effectively leverage those media for entertainment, learning, and critical analysis. This research focuses on an undergraduate media literacy course that teaches how children and adolescents absorb and interact with different types of media. The course sent undergraduate students into the surrounding community to teach what they are learning on campus to children in elementary- and middle-school programs, either in the classroom or after school. The authors used participant action research (PAR) to evaluate, revise, and improve the course. Based on undergraduate course evaluations and course-related blogs by students, the authors worked to improved the course year after year.

Proliferating media and other digital tools have created a landscape that beckons children and adolescents as consumers and producers. It is imperative that young people develop the knowledge and skills to effectively leverage those media for entertainment, learning, and critical analysis. Whether one approaches media literacy from a protective position (Potter, 2010) or an empowerment perspective (Hobbs, 2011), it is clear that educating children about the media that surround them needs to be an integral part of education. The question that this paper raises is how to engage college students in this collective social project. One answer is through service learning. Who better to deliver that education than college students who are at the cutting edge of these technologies?

This research focuses on an undergraduate media literacy course that teaches how children and adolescents absorb and interact with different types of media, including print (books, magazines, and newspapers as well as billboards, clothing, and other places where advertising is found), broadcast media, video games, popular music and music videos, movies, the Internet, social media, and smartphones. Topics covered include violence, sexuality, food and eating disorders, advertising, commodification, and stereotypic portrayals of race, gender, and social class. Through readings, lectures, and class discussions, students become familiar with how communications media have influenced them and with research that documents the effects of these media on children and adolescents. They also learn media literacy tools that can help children and adolescents resist these influences. Through service learning, students share what they learn with children and adolescents in the surrounding community.

The service-learning component of the course sent students out to the surrounding community to teach five one-hour lessons about what they were

learning in the course, adapted for the children they were teaching. Groups of between three and six student teachers worked with elementary- and middle-school children in classroom settings and in after-school programs. The research follows the course over the past three years, during which the authors used participant action research to evaluate, revise, and improve the course. The authors derived their understanding of the course's deficiencies, and some suggestions for improvement, from the students through their course evaluations and the course-related blogs they wrote to share with the professor and classmates.

Musil (2009) argued that the democratization of education in the United States over the last century is a result of the collective action of citizens who joined together to "recast the script of American democracy" (p. 53). This democratization has led to significant changes in the post-secondary education classroom, in American society, and in how U.S. citizens engage the world. Educators must acknowledge two interrelated needs: to educate students to live in a more diverse society that interacts in a global context and to prepare them to live as active and engaged citizens. Service learning involves students in society as part of their education, preparing them for lives of service and engagement after graduation.

Service learning is also a strong pedagogical tool that engages students in the community as part of the coursework; their service experience provides another "text" for the course. Jacoby (1996) wrote that service learning is "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs, together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (p. 5).

Using a text focused on media effects on children and adolescents (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2002), Finucane developed a media literacy course that exposed students to the influences that had impacted their own development. The course also required students to pass on their new learning to children in the community through service learning at a variety of in-class and after-school settings. After teaching the course in 2003 and 2004, Finucane became John Carroll University's service-learning program director and the course was not taught again using a service-learning approach until Buchanan revived it in the fall of 2010. Buchanan adapted it somewhat, while retaining the textbook and service-learning components Finucane recommended.

After teaching the course again in 2012, Buchanan discovered participant action research, a systematic evaluation method widely used by educators (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer, 2012, p. 293-4). This paper explains how she used it after the 2012 class to further improve the course in a systematic, documented, and replicable way.

Literature Review

Regarded by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as a "high-impact practice," service learning engages students in learning, in and out of the classroom (Kuh, 2008, p. 1). It offers students the opportunity to apply textbook material to their experience in the community and to apply community experience to the textbook. Discussions are enriched; learning is deepened.

Yorio and Ye (2012) argued that student learning increases from service-learning experiences. Their meta-analytic review of 57 published articles revealed that students who completed service-learning courses had significant gains in cognitive development, personal insight, and understanding of diversity, cultural awareness, ethical and moral issues, and community needs and issues.

Research has documented that students engaged in service-learning experience many benefits, including:

- Increased understanding of the course content (Applegate & Morreale, 1999; Jameson, Clayton, & Bringle, 2008; Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006; Souza, 1999),
- Increased recognition of the explicit connection between theory and practice (Soukup, 1999),
- Increased saliency of and sensitivity to diversity issues (Astin & Sax, 1998; Boyle-Baise, 2002; Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Vogelsgang & Astin, 2000),
- Increased commitment to the community (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994; Reising *et al.,* 2006),
- Development of self-efficacy (Cone, 2009; Reeb, Folger, Langsner, Ryan, & Crouse, 2010; Williams, King, & Koob, 2002).

Hobbs (2011) noted that "pedagogical practices must be emphatically student-centered and inquiry-oriented, helping students interrogate the process of making meaning through critical investigation using strategies of both close reading . . . and media production . . . " (p. 426). Thus, neither a completely content-based, traditional presentation of the media nor

a technical, decontextualized, production approach to media serves students well. They need both. Engaging media literacy students in service-learning projects provides opportunities to explore both content and production aspects.

How the Service Learning Worked

The students from media literacy class were placed in five locations around the city, some in elementary school classrooms during the school day, and others at after-school programs in schools or community centers. At each location, several students from the college class team-taught five weeks of one-hour lessons, with the classroom teacher or a member of the program staff present in the room, or close by, at all times.

Starting in 2012, after feedback from the 2010 class, the five-week service-learning exercise always began with the same introductory lesson. The objective was to teach the children what the word "media" means, what kinds of media Americans are exposed to, and how frequent that media exposure is. The teaching team started by asking the entire class to name as many media as possible. Getting a complete list of media can take some time when working with fourth graders or a mixed-age group in an after-school program. Developing such a list takes time, even in the college classroom. Students may instantly identify TV, radio, and newspapers, but do not always think of their telephones, books, computers, and T-shirts emblazoned with logos as media, even if all of them deliver messages. This is how this program defined media for the children: things that deliver messages. A medium is in the middle, between a sender and a receiver. If a blackboard is available, or a flip chart, the college students drew a diagram to illustrate this: a "medium" (the singular of "media") is in between, just as the word "medium" is between small and large. Diagrams help reinforce this with younger children, but if there is no blackboard or flipchart, even hand gestures can get the point across. This very simple, clear definition was central to everything the service learners would be teaching, so it was essential to get it across to every child in the first lesson.

In some classes, particularly those with younger children, the next step in that first lesson was a hands-on activity: drawing pictures of their favorite media or creating a collage using pictures cut from old magazines. This group of service learners discovered (and Buchanan observed on site visits) that some kind of hands-on activity was essential. Elementary school children will not sit still for long, particularly in an after-school program. And as the teaching teams soon realized, a discussion does not constitute an "activity" for children this age. Some sort of action must occur or children lose interest, which can mean they all start talking at once or running around the room making noise. Things can get out of hand quickly. Seeing student teaching teams experience these problems helped Buchanan, with the help of educators Scott Embacher and Elizabeth Deegan, to develop that first lesson plan and give advice on the remaining four lesson plans the students submitted before each week of service learning.

With older children, the first lesson's discussion can go further than simply identifying media. The Center for Media Literacy publishes an excellent handout containing the Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts of Media Literacy (Center for Media Literacy, 2005). These questions were shared with the older children from the start, in handouts, while the younger children were encouraged through a variety of teaching techniques to ask the five key questions about all media messages: Who created this message? What techniques did they use to attract attention? How might different people understand this message differently? What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in this message, or omitted from it? And why was this message sent? (Center for Media Literacy, 2005)

After the first lesson, student teaching teams could choose topics of the remaining four lessons in the series and could develop their own lesson plans. These plans were graded. Buchanan and the classroom teacher or program director, where possible, provided feedback before the plans were scheduled for use. All lesson plans were sent ahead of time to the teachers and program directors; some chose not to respond.

The topics addressed in the four remaining lessons were usually things students had spent a week discussing in the classroom: advertising; media violence and video games; racial and gender stereotypes; food advertising and its relationship to eating disorders; sexuality in music videos; children and the Internet; drug, alcohol, and tobacco use in the media; and the positive or "prosocial" aspects of media. One group developed a lesson on social media, at the request of a group of high-school students, which led to some excellent additional content during Buchanan's Internet week.

Indeed, the relationship between the students' les-

son plans and the college class became remarkably interactive because students took over the Friday classes with presentations about each of these weekly topics and how to apply them in service-learning classes. The presentation teams were composed of students from different service-learning teams. The beauty of this arrangement was that teams that presented early in the semester contained at least one student from each service-learning team; any expertise on the topic and lesson plan developed for the presentation was readily shared with all five service-learning teams. This also brought expertise on different topics to the service-learning teams.

The presentations included marvelous suggestions for activities that worked well with the children, including a bingo game that used the names of popular websites instead of the usual bingo letters and numbers; a game based on the television show "Jeopardy" that featured questions about drugs, alcohol, and tobacco in the media; a "logo game" that asked children to guess the company names for popular logos, shown without identifying labels; and a simple, yet highly effective exercise that used a paper plate and markers to teach children the portion sizes recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in its daily food guide.

Methodology

Participant action research (PAR), a participant-observer method widely used in social research, public health, and education (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Lapan *et al.,* 2012; Walter, 2009), was the methodology chosen to assess this course in 2010 and again in 2012, because it permitted the instructors to evaluate and improve a course that both have taught and one is still teaching, rather than having an outsider come in to evaluate it. In addition, the methodology is designed to involve those on the receiving end of programs and services—in this case, the college students—in providing input.

Figure 1. *The steps in participant action research, which form a spiral that begins again with step 7.*

The originator of this method, Kurt Lewin, developed PAR in the 1940s as a way for social workers to assess and improve social action programs for low-income people without hiring pricey consultants. Its hallmark was involving those the research was being done about in the design of the project and building upon their feedback to create what Lewin called a "spiral" of continuous reflection and improvement (see Figure 1) (Walter, 2009). It was used widely for a decade but fell out of favor in the 1950s, only to be reborn in the 1990s as a tool for educators trying to improve their courses (Lapan, Quartaroli, & Riemer 2012, p. 293-4). It remains very popular for that purpose as well as for social research of the sort Lewin originally envisioned, where it is often called participatory action research or action research (Walter, 2009). It is also widely used in public health research (Baum et al., 2006). The democratic nature of PAR is an important feature to many:

> Its qualities of being both an active research practice and one based on the principles of democracy are what draw many social science researchers to PAR, particularly those coming from more qualitative paradigms. The diffusion, or even relocation, of power from the researcher to the community of interest is a central element of the research method. Within participatory action research the researcher is the tool for facilitating change, rather than the owner, director and expert in the research project. (Walter, 2009, chap. 21, p. 2)

When applied to education, the participant-action system is a codified version of the natural activity any teacher might engage in at the end of a course: going over the student evaluations and assignments, then outlining possible changes based on what students thought was good and bad about the course. It seems simple, but going through the steps Lewin established provides a more rigorous, systematic, and documented way of testing and evaluating the changes one decides to implement. The steps include (see Figure 1 for a graphic illustration):

1. **Focusing**: Deciding what needs improvement;
2. **Planning**: Deciding how to do it;
3. **Acting**: Carrying out the plan;
4. **Observing**: Using an objective measure of the impact of any changes;

5. **Reflecting**: Deciding what the data are telling about the impact of the changes;
6. **Revising**: Modifying the approach and trying again if necessary;
7. **Refocusing**: Deciding what else needs improvement, which restarts the entire cycle.

In this project, student evaluations and blogs became the source of ideas about what needed improvement, as well as the objective measures of the impact of changes. When the course began, Finucane required her students to write journals as a way of recording and reflecting upon their experiences in service learning. In 2010, the first year after which PAR was used, Buchanan changed these to blogs. These were written online using Blackboard, a course-management system that permits limited-access settings, making them available only to the professor or to the professor and the class. In the 2010 class, they were available only to the professor. These writings clearly expressed the joys and frustrations of the service-learning process, as well as the revelations students experienced in the classroom. As a professor, Buchanan found she had never before felt so "in touch" with a class, because the blogs provided continuous feedback on what the students were experiencing. At the end of the semester, close analysis of these blogs, along with the usual anonymous student evaluations, provided much food for thought and several solid ideas for improving the course.

The full cycle, from Focusing through Refocusing, has been used twice, with the 2013 iteration of the course in progress as this article was written. The current syllabus contains improvements suggested by students—either by identifying a problem or by making positive suggestions—from both the 2010 and 2012 classes. Because it is a continuing cycle, there is never an endpoint; this method provides an ongoing process of improvement for a course that, in its 2013 version, attracted an overflow registration despite the fact it is not a required course in the major.

Results

1. Focusing

The first step involved determining measures of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction in the 2010 course. It was decided to use student evaluation scores (quantitative), comments on student evaluations (qualitative), and comments in student blogs (qualitative).

Evaluations: See Figure 2 for a graph of average scores from the entire class in the 2010 evaluations.

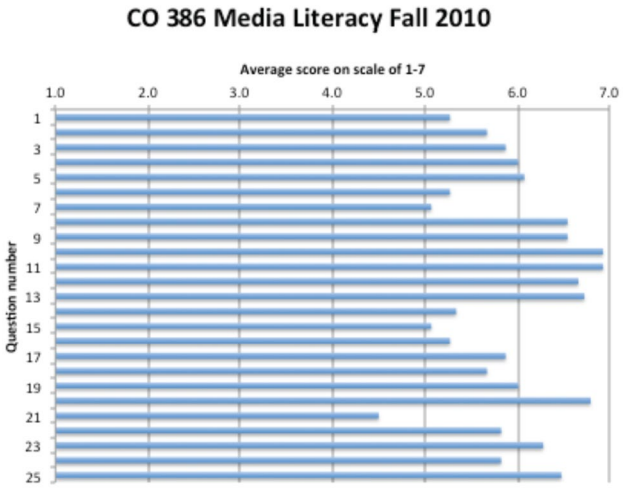

Figure 2. *Average scores on student evaluations for the Fall 2010 class.*

The low scores came in response to questions 6 and 7, dealing with how much students felt they had learned, and whether their interest in the subject matter had increased; questions 14-16, dealing with how well organized and interesting the classes were; and question 21, on whether the final exam covered the important material in the course.[1]

Comments on evaluations and in blogs: Several themes stood out: problems in aspects of the service learning, problems in the classroom, and issues with the nature of the student presentations.

Regarding service learning:

1. Many students said they felt inadequately prepared for teaching;
2. Some described their placements as disorganized; Some groups had much better experiences than others;
3. Due to a glitch in the online registration system in 2010, students had not been advised when registering for the course that it had a service-learning component. They asked that this be remedied;
4. At least half the class felt that the service learning was the highlight of the course and a tremendous learning experience. Their blogs were filled with insights and stories from their placements.

Regarding classroom activity:

1. Use shorter videos and have more in-class discussion of them.
2. More class time should be used to prepare students for teaching. A professional educator should come in and teach how to do this.
3. Introduce more challenging course materials and

readings.
4. Provide more technical instruction on the use of Blackboard, the course management tool.
5. International examples and comparisons should be more varied and not always refer to Buchanan's homeland, Canada.

Regarding the students' in-class presentations:

1. The student presentations were a highlight of the course.
2. The presentations should not focus entirely on lesson plans, as they did the first year. Focus them more broadly, on the topic.

Regarding the blogs:

Some students said the blogs were a waste of time and energy, while others liked the blogs but wanted them shared with the entire class.

2. Planning

Taking all these comments and insights into account, Buchanan decided to make the following changes in the 2012 version of the course:

1. Talk to the teacher whose service-learning group was happiest, do a site visit, and ask the teacher's advice on how to make things better. Keep in touch with this teacher and try to visit other sites, especially if problems develop.
2. Do more in-class preparation for the service-learning teaching. Have a professional educator come in to explain approaches to teaching the age groups that students encounter in their placements.
3. Require students to prepare the same first lesson plan. Spend a lot of time, as a class, preparing for that first lesson, on the topic "What are Media?"
4. Focus weekly student presentations on the week's topic, and share lesson plans and teaching ideas as handouts.
5. Allow more time each week for students to meet in small groups to discuss how to teach that week's topic (or whatever topics they feel most drawn to) with their service-learning groups.
6. In the classroom, avoid full-length videos and use short excerpts instead.
7. In class, go over more material from the text and videos, supplementing and emphasizing the most important material.
8. Make the course more academically rigorous: Add more theory.
9. Include material from a variety of non-U.S. perspectives.
10. Continue the blogs but provide more frequent feedback to students, and open them up to the class so students can learn from each other.
11. Make the final exam more inclusive of the textbook.

3. Acting

In 2012, Buchanan attempted to implement all the above suggestions:

- The first step was an on-site visit to Scott Embacher at St. Francis Elementary School, whose service-learning group had reported the best experiences in 2010. He made a number of helpful suggestions and agreed to keep in touch with Buchanan to give feedback on how her students were doing.
- Another professional teacher, Elizabeth Deegan, came to class to help the students with teaching. Considerably more time was devoted to preparing the students for teaching, through lectures, discussions, and small groups.
- Buchanan became more adept at using excerpts from videos, rather than entire documentaries, to provide examples and spark class discussions.
- More theory was taught in the lectures, and more readings were introduced that offered different perspectives or topics from those covered in the textbook.
- Blogs were shared with the entire class, not just the professor.
- The final exam was, again, a take-home essay, but it asked students to draw upon a variety of course materials including the textbook, lectures, other readings, material covered in the videos, and service-learning experiences.

4. Observing

Evaluations: The quantitative results of the 2012 class evaluations are presented in Figure 3. There was a visible improvement, with nearly all scores moving up into the top category, between 6 and 7 on the 1-7 scale. The two remaining low scores (i.e. below 6) were on question 5, "I find the level of difficulty in this course to be appropriate," and question 21, "The examinations cover the important aspects of the course."

Comments on the student evaluations: For the most part, comments were extremely positive, though one disgruntled student suggested that the content was "repetitive of material I have learned in many other of my Communication courses."

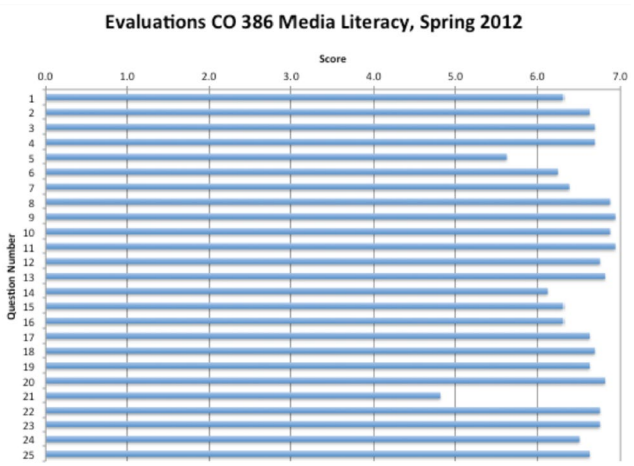

Figure 3. *Average scores on student evaluations for the 2012 class.*

There was a single comment saying that less video and more discussion would be preferable, and there was a single comment about an unsatisfactory service-learning placement. One additional comment suggested that it would be helpful to have questions to answer in the blogs to structure the writing.

Comments in the blogs: Several wrote positively in their blogs about the "synergy" between this course and others they were taking, describing them as "complementary." Curtis Walker, a junior, wrote a blog entry that pulled together insights from three courses on that week's topic:

> It is interesting as in three of my class this semester—Media Literacy, Women in Mass Media, and Philosophy of Mind & Body—(we) are now focusing on this topic of the objectification of women! . . . I found the amount of money spent per year to support a certain diet, to buy cosmetics and/or the amount contributed to the pornography industry to be astonishing. During the recovery period of a recession, billions of dollars are poured into industries that control this beauty myth, having women buy into images of ideal women with bodies and "beauty" so unrealistic, the models themselves have to aspire to be the image modified by photo editing systems. I began to wonder, why the beauty myth is applied to women the majority of the time and why do women generally abide by its ruling and continue to go out and buy into industries that promise to "fix them" and "make them beautiful?" Perhaps it is a lack of education about media literacy or perhaps the pressure put on by society is too hard to turn against. Back in the nineteenth and twentieth century, there was the issue with corsets and if a woman wore a corset, she would be seen as upscale and "lady-like" and accepted into society, however as Amelia Bloomer and many others pointed out, the corset not only provided a false image of what every women should aspire to look like, it also proved to have serious health consequences. Today, the corset may not be the problem, but it is replaced by an array of items such as diet pills and high heels, to name a couple examples. I believe the solution is for more education on media literacy. (Walker, 2012)

The blogs did discuss problems in one of the service-learning groups, despite repeated efforts by the university's Center for Service in Learning to intervene.

The most significant issue that remained in the 2012 class, though to a lesser extent, was students' continuing feeling that they lacked preparation for teaching. For the most part, the problems ended after the first week and seemed to be a result of their not knowing the children and what they were capable of before starting to teach. Helen Cestra, a senior, expressed in her blog what it was like on the first day:

> When we first arrived, the group was finishing up their snack. Right away, I noticed the children were very hyper and distracted from whatever they were doing. The teacher would try and get their attention and students would purposely not pay attention or talk to the other student next to them. She would have to raise her voice and get each student's attention before she could say what she needed to say. My group quickly realized the challenges we may face and had to rearrange our lesson plan to adapt to the students' ability. The teacher told us she almost never does activities with the group as a whole because it can be too distracting, so she split the group into two smaller groups. This worked a lot better for us. My group of about 10 students were able to concentrate better, but still had some behavioral issues. Overall however, they all seemed very interested and eager to learn, and were understanding the concepts and ideas we were telling them. In the future, we will have to bring the difficulty of the lesson plan down just a bit so the children can understand. (Cestra, 2012)

5. Reflecting

Getting advice from professional teachers in 2012 was most helpful for both Buchanan and the class. On her visit to teacher Scott Embacher, Buchanan recorded a list of his suggestions and spent one class period going over these with the 2012 class, shortly before they began their service learning. Embacher also sent weekly feedback on how the group assigned to his class was doing. This was an extremely valuable relationship. It would be helpful to build this kind of interaction with all program leaders. However, it is not always possible.[2]

The second professional educator who made a difference to the students' teaching experiences was Elizabeth Deegan from John Carroll University's Center for Service and Social Action. Deegan taught high-school English before moving to John Carroll, and she brought to the class a set of important teaching tips and tools. First, the students learned about children's different learning styles (Southwestern Community College, n.d.), and how to gear their lessons to a variety of learning styles so that every student would absorb the material. Second, they learned about Bloom's taxonomy (Overbaugh & Schultz, n.d.), which categorizes the different levels of learning into a clear hierarchy. Students found out that it is important to start at the bottom, then move up through the levels; without that foundational material, students find it very hard to absorb more advanced concepts, and younger children are simply not capable of engaging in some of the higher levels of thinking. Deegan also shared some simple materials from the Center for Media Literacy, notably handouts on the Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts of media literacy (Center for Media Literacy, 2005). She also left the class with an excellent template for lesson plans.

In 2012 considerable class time was devoted to discussing these Five Key Questions and Core Concepts. These formed the basis of the service-learning teaching, and also gave the class a framework for understanding the many topics they were learning about in the classroom.

It is often said that if you want to learn something well, try teaching it. Students felt motivated to do a good job with their teaching in service-learning groups; hence, they absorbed the Key Questions and Core Concepts well. It also made a difference that in 2012 students were clearly informed of the service-learning requirement when registering for the course.

Buchanan found that, for most of her students, the most challenging aspect of teaching was learning to speak simply and understand the concrete (rather than abstract) way children think. One student blog, by senior Jeremy Himmelright, expressed the difficulties in simplifying what he said to the children:

> I was nervous but ready and, as I found, a bit too overzealous in trying to explain certain difficult terms. I have not had the chance to teach a younger audience and made a mess of using difficult vernacular. I attempted to describe encoding, and realized I had to completely alter the way I speak in front of this class. I had to use simple terms to explain more complex concepts (Himmelright, 2012).

However, Himmelright's fellow group member Maurice Haynes, also a senior, went on to report that things improved dramatically once they got to know the children in their group, and he discovered the joy of teaching:

> First off, the feeling of making a difference is one that cannot be replaced. I enjoy seeing the smile of the children when they felt they accomplished something. I really enjoy teaching them knowledge that I have learned in my lifetime. I have something in common with these children. Not just that I am African American, but the fact that we are both tech savvy and understand the nature of the generation we live in. We live in the iPod, Facebook, laptop and video game generation. We both understand that, but what I am here to do is to inform and make them aware of the potential dangers and negativity they can experience and see when they use these forms of media. I also can make the students aware of the positive effects too. We need not to force our thoughts, but show them the direction of good and positive while introducing the negative. The world is not perfect so we cannot teach that in the classroom. (Haynes, 2012)

Finally, yet equally important to the other changes Buchanan made in 2012, she kept in closer touch with the Center for Service and Social Action at the university, whose staff organized the service-learning placements. This helped them to "nip in the bud" a few problems that occurred at some of the sites. It also contributed at least one major change to the 2013 course. The Center for Service and Social Action, as a

result of this better communication, suggested a 10-week service-learning commitment, in which the first five weeks are spent simply getting to know the children, and the last five weeks are for teaching media literacy.

Important changes were made in 2012 to the lectures and classroom use of videos. Buchanan learned a lot about YouTube and how to use short excerpts of longer videos as examples to spark discussion. This enlivened class discussions and participation, and as a result, brought the class closer together.

Another contributor to class cohesion, it seemed, was the sharing of blogs. In the 2010 class, only the professor could read student blogs. In 2012, they were shared, and the evaluations that year contained no more comments about the blogs being a useless exercise. Students commented on each other's blogs and shared service-learning experiences between groups; they also shared their understanding of the topics discussed in class. These comments built upon one another and enhanced everyone's understanding. It also seemed to help those students who had trouble understanding what was required in the blogs: They could see the blogs of other students, some of whom were very comfortable with blogging, so they got the idea fairly quickly.

More theory was added to the classes, as well. While the students did not seem to voluntarily engage in theoretical discussions, either in class or in their blogs, they did occasionally refer to a theorist or react to what that person had said in a video, or to a concept raised in a lecture. In addition, the class experienced some visits by more senior professors in the department, who gave Buchanan advice on how to punch up some of the theory with more examples and graphics. All of this has contributed to making the 2013 iteration of the course better in this area.

Student presentations in 2012 improved when students took the advice of the 2010 students and focused on the topic as a whole. Topics included media violence, gender depictions, the pervasive influences of advertising, and representations of unhealthy products such as junk food, drugs, and alcohol. Lesson plans constituted only part of the presentation, were included as a separate handout, or both. Presenters were still asked to address ideas for sharing the topic with young children, and some eagerly obliged with activities they got the whole class to do. There was even one original video made by student presenters, which at least two of the service-learning groups showed to the children in their programs.

6. Revising

Students in the 2012 class clearly felt better prepared for the teaching aspect of their service learning. A few difficulties arose on the first day and were quickly overcome thereafter. This seemed to be happening because students had to start teaching right away upon first meeting the children. They did five weeks of service, all of which were devoted to teaching. This led to the decision that, for 2013, service learning should start at the beginning of the semester with a regular, 10-week commitment (as is more typical at John Carroll University), rather than five weeks at mid-semester required in 2010 and 2012. The first five weeks would be without any teaching obligation; students would simply spend time with the children and get to know them, helping out with the regular activities. After five weeks, students would start teaching.

One site needed more work to remedy things. Students complained that they showed up regularly, only to find that no one was expecting them or that the person in charge was not the same person as had been there the previous week. It was decided that a 10-week service commitment might help this situation as well: Since students would have more lead time before teaching, program organizers could get used to their regular weekly appearances. The Center for Service and Social Action also developed some programming that the students could introduce from the start, including a plan to teach children to play chess.

Discussion

The final step of the PAR process is similar to the discussion section of most papers, so it is reported here, rather than in the Results.

7. Refocusing

The 2013 spring semester began with a sense of anticipation about the media literacy course. Several elements changed in response to comments on evaluations and in the blogs from the class of 2012, bringing renewed optimism about the experiences that were coming up for these students.

It was feared that the new, 10-week service-learning commitment might drive some busy students away, but quite the opposite happened: The class was more full than ever, with additional students asking to join the class after it had reached the maximum

number of students. The students were well aware of the commitment, and when Buchanan went around the room, asking them to introduce themselves the first day, a significant number said they were there because of the service learning and because they enjoyed working with children.

The 10-week service-learning period also allowed Buchanan to visit one initially problematic site before students started teaching, to ensure that they would have groups the right size, rooms that offered some quiet, and the other needed resources. This site visit was so helpful that a when problems arose at a different program, a visit was made promptly to head off problems and give the students advice. Ironing things out early in the program was much less problematic than finding out in the middle of a five-week program that it was not working.

The blogs worked well in 2013, with questions from the professor guiding the early blogging before students started their service learning. This excellent suggestion from a student allowed for further discussion of some issues raised in class, giving students more time for reflection before commenting. It also ensured that students who have trouble speaking up in class got a chance to contribute. It remains to be seen whether the class will turn out as well as, or better than, the 2012 iteration of the course, but the writing and publication of this article will show students one thing for certain: They are being heard, and their suggestions are being used to improve this course, year upon year.

The cyclical nature of PAR has proved valuable to the process of evaluating and improving this particular course. Future research might focus on applying PAR in other courses and other disciplines. It is an excellent tool for educators that opens up the process to considerable student participation and input, and for that reason, contributes to the democratization of education.

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Endnotes

1. In that first year, Buchanan decided to get creative with the final exam and ask the students to do a take-home exam in three parts, each drawing upon what they had learned in the course to write essays in response to a video statement by a media theorist. The three were Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Edward Said. The class had covered these theorists in lectures and done readings from them or others using their ideas, so Buchanan wanted students to integrate the other material—such as their service learning—with the statements by these theorists. While students had fun with the exam and ended up appreciating it eventually, they had only just seen the exam questions when they wrote the course evaluations, and it was clearly not the type of test they were expecting.
2. For example, in February 2013, Buchanan made a visit to a service-learning site and spent an hour with the director of a Boys and Girls Club, where she talked over plans for her students' upcoming teaching experience. He answered all questions, took Buchanan on a tour, and left her feeling most encouraged. But contacting him later by email proved very difficult.

Also, students said he sometimes was not there when they arrived on Friday afternoons. He explained that he often had duties outside the building at this time and suggested that the students deal with a another staff member. Buchanan hopes this problem is going to work out, but it is not yet at the level of the relationship with Embacher. Also, it has not been possible for Buchanan to visit all the service-learning sites, though this remains a goal.