

Academic Service-Learning Enlivens the Meaning of Community Nursing

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to describe the findings of a research study examining the experience of undergraduate nursing students' participation in Academic Service-Learning. The specific goal of this study was to assess the influence of Academic Service-Learning (A S-L) pedagogy on undergraduate nursing students' understanding of community health nursing. This hermeneutic phenomenological study was grounded in the theoretical framework of caring set forth in the Community Nursing Practice Model (CNPM). The findings revealed essential themes synthesized into a constitutive pattern – Bringing to Life the Meaning of Community.

Key Words:

Academic Service-Learning, Community Health Nursing, Caring, Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

Introduction

*Everyone has a purpose in life...a unique gift or special talent to give to others.
And when we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the
ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit, which is the ultimate goal of all goals.
– Deepak Chopra*

Academic Service-Learning pedagogy has been used in colleges of nursing and higher education for many years. Service-learning has successfully enhanced nursing student's experiences regarding the importance of service and civic responsibilities to persons in communities by becoming engaged in community assessment, planning and purposeful learning. The purpose of this paper is to describe the findings of a research study examining the experience of undergraduate nursing students' participation in Academic Service-Learning. The specific goal of this study was to assess the influence of Academic Service-Learning (A S-L) pedagogy on undergraduate nursing students' understanding of community health nursing. A community nursing practice course that incorporates service learning differs from other academic course work in that the course combines community service with specific learning objectives. Service learning is transformative, enhances nursing students' critical thinking and increased self-perceived abilities and competencies (Amerson, 2010; Simoni & McKinney, 1998). Nursing education provides an excellent vehicle for incorporating Academic Service-Learning into curricula through practice experiences. Exploring nursing students' interpretation of their service-learning experience will contribute to the body of nursing knowledge, practice, and education.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on academic service learning in nursing education programs revealed 16 research studies. The findings from the research studies include increased competency, course satisfaction, and transformed classroom learning.

Norris (2007) discovered that faculty members are vital to the integration of service-learning. Service-learning in nursing education is transformative, enhances the nursing students' critical thinking and increases self-perceived abilities and competencies (Amerson, 2010; Simoni & McKinney, 1998). Several studies demonstrate the value of service-learning for nursing students. The studies report that nursing students reflected mastery of course objectives, increased satisfaction with the course, increases in self-perceived cultural competency, and higher scores on exams (Bassi, 2011; Bentley & Ellison, 2005; Caffrey, Neander, Markle, & Stewart, 2005; Green, Comer, Elliott, & Neubrandner, 2011; Laughlin, Pothoff, Schwartz, Synowieckib, & Yager, 2010; White, Festa, Allocca, & Abraham, 1999).

There are few studies describing community, client and the nursing student outcomes. Reisin, Laux, Shea, Hensel, Allen, & Watts (2008) discovered that service-learning was a positive contributor to both community clients' and student nurses' outcomes in a community education and screening program to improve knowledge of hypertension and diabetes risk factors. Overall student satisfaction and the development of professional and civic responsibility was revealed in a descriptive research design study from a university based community program that implemented

blood pressure screening and health counseling for the university community (Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006). Van Hofwegen, Kirkham, & Harwood (2005) report mutual benefits to both students and service recipients in a qualitative study of partnerships to build civic responsibility and provide service to the community. Lastly, Gillis & McClellan (2010) report that service-learning produces fully engaged professionals, recommending its integration into nursing programs.

Vergee (2010) challenges the readers to consider the grounding of Academic Service-Learning (A S-L) as charity-based or transformative. Charity-based approaches? approaches embrace the notion of community needs. It is the most common form of A S-L, whose? Aim for nursing education is to enhance student outcomes and encourage a transfer of resources such as money, clothing, food, housing, and knowledge to a group who lacks these resources. Another view of A S-L is grounded in a transformative or social justice paradigm that calls students to participate with the community and explore and effect societal influences that contribute to the vulnerability of a particular community or group. Community outcomes are as important as the student outcomes and those outcomes are collaboratively informed by the community, the students, and the higher learning community.

Theoretical Framework

This study The study here reported was framed in the theoretical perspective of caring set forth in the Community Nursing Practice Model (CNPM) and essentially focused on the notion of empathetic concern?(Parker & Barry, 2006). The CNPM, a hand drawn water color of concentric circles, is grounded in values and yet serves as an inspiration to co-create unique responses to calls for nursing. (See Figure 1). The transcendent values of respect for person, wholeness of person, and caring are expressed in each nursing situation. Actualizing values guide community practice in specific nursing encounters. Adopted from the World Health Organization (1978) they include access to care, essential care as defined by the person or community, community participation, empowerment, and intersectoral collaboration.

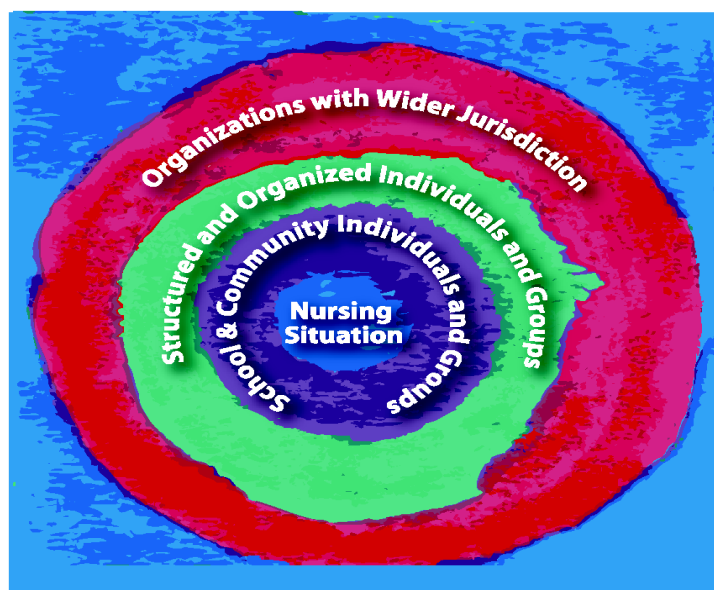
The CNPM supports values-based practice within the structure of services, activities and community partnerships and illuminates four interrelated themes of nursing, person, community and environment. Nursing is described as nurturing the wholeness of persons and environments through caring. The focus of nursing is caring, requiring the integration of multiple ways of knowing. Nursing knowledge emerges from and is embedded in the nursing situation which is described as the lived experience of caring between the nurse and the one receiving care. The nurse is present in the nursing situation to hear calls for nursing and to create responses that are unique to the person/community. There is no predetermined nursing, rather it evolves from the inquiry of How can I/we be helpful to you? Respect for the? person is a transcendent value present in each nursing situation when caring for clients, colleagues, or communities. Being open to understand the other and to learn and grow from hearing the other's hopes and dreams calls for humility and self-acknowledgement of not knowing the other.

Community is defined by its members, who share common strengths, concerns, and values. Within the Model the understanding of environment includes the immediate

surroundings as well as the socio-political context of persons and communities encouraging upstream thinking.

The structure of services and activities are depicted within the concentric circles around the core. The amorphous interconnectedness of the core to the circles and the lack of structure invite creativity into the nursing situation, drawing on intersectoral collaboration to nurture well being. The nursing situation is in the core and services may include providing access to essential care, assessments, referrals, health promotion, care navigation, home visits, and enrollment in health insurance programs. Services in the first circle may include consultations, and collaborations with parents, guardians, and administrative personnel concerned for the well being of those in the nursing situation. The second circle includes a wider circle of empathetic concern that may include community resources with expertise in a particular discipline or practice area that could be called on for consultation, collaboration, evaluation or appraisal of the situation. The third circle includes local, regional, national, and international organizations that provide structure, policy, resources and consultation that support and influence the well being of individuals and communities integral to the nursing situation in the core.

The Community Nursing Practice Model: Concentric Circles of Empathetic Concern



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An Exemplar Academic Service-Learning Project

The following exemplar illuminates the CNPM: Values, themes and services.

Mary, an 18 year old student who was pregnant, came to the high school clinic for advice. I asked “how can I be helpful to you?” She wanted to stop smoking. The impact of Mary’s smoking on her unborn child was of great concern. However, first and foremost, I saw the student as a unique individual, the product of circumstances of

which I know very little, if indeed anything. I had been instructed in class that you just never know what's going on in the life of a client. I had to set aside my personal bias and care for her with the utmost human respect and dignity. In any case, scolding the student would more likely cause her to lose trust in me than benefit the baby. Given the understanding of how difficult smoking is to quit, having empathy for Mary in order to establish trust was my first step. We began to talk and I listened intently to her story of her family life, pregnancy, and hope in having a healthy baby. She was receiving prenatal care at the health department and according to her was living in a safe environment. Then I attempted to educate her in a compassionate way about the risk of smoking to the health of her unborn baby. We discussed smoking cessation programs and I told her I would explore what was available in the community. I wanted to remain present with her for support and encouragement.

I discussed the situation with my fellow nursing students and we explored smoking cessation programs in the area. We called the health department and were invited to attend a County-wide Tobacco Free Partnership meeting. Various strategies targeted toward preventing teens from smoking were discussed. We asked how we could help and were asked if we would help develop two chapters of Students Working Against Tobacco (SWAT), a peer education program, one at a middle school and one at the high school Mary attended. And we said yes. We met with the SWAT chapter members and the faculty advisor. Our goal was to work in partnership with the students to build a successful chapter and to raise awareness about tobacco, its use, health concerns, industry advertising tactics, and avoidance. We helped the SWAT team organize a Pep Rally focused on tobacco avoidance and conducted health education classes. After the presentations and Pep Rally several students demonstrated great excitement and interest in joining the SWAT team and advocating for this cause.

Overall our Academic Service-Learning Project was an amazing success. It promoted growth not only for the youth of the community but also for each member of our community practice group. We grew in knowledge of teenage use of tobacco and community resources focused on tobacco prevention and health promotion. Moreover, we learned how our interaction and involvement with teens in the community can have a powerful impact to promote change and positive outcomes for the future. Our hope is to continue empowering our youth to stand against tobacco and remain advocates who will combat the harmful effects of tobacco use in our society. Personal communication, April 2010.

In reflecting on the nursing situation in the above exemplar the values of respect, wholeness, caring, access, empowerment and community participation are evident. The themes of nursing as nurturing the wholeness of persons is expressed and respect for person is a dominant theme throughout the nursing situation. The services provided were assessment, compassionate listening, and referral to a community smoking cessation program and co-participation with teens to strengthen their SWAT chapters at two public schools.

Method

Sample and Setting:

A hermeneutic phenomenological interpretative method was used to examine students' reflections on the experience of participating in Academic Service-Learning (A S-L) activities as part of their community health nursing course during the Spring 2010 semester at Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing at Florida Atlantic University. Data are short answer responses to questions on the course final examination. The study population was 17 undergraduate nursing students who had completed a Community Health Nursing course in Spring 2010. The nursing situation provided above is one exemplar of Academic Service Learning Projects. Others include an H1N1 immunization outreach, and a Day at the Zoo, a health promotion project with children enrolled in a Head Start program.

Ethical Considerations:

The Institutional Review Board of Florida Atlantic University reviewed and approved this study. All students who had completed the course were invited to participate. The researchers explained the study and obtained an informed consent before retrieving and analyzing the data. The participants were assured that their privacy and confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study. Data were coded and were stored in a locked office of one of the researchers.

Research Questions:

The research question guiding this study was: What is the meaning of the A S-L experience in understanding community health nursing?

Data Analysis:

The data were analyzed independently by two researchers and the findings were confirmed by the five member research team. A seven-stage interpretative process was conducted as follows: (1) The data were read as a whole to obtain an overall understanding of the data. (2) The data were reread and categories and units of meaning were identified. (3) The categories were examined for similarities and differences. (4) Additional categories were identified throughout the process, reflecting shared practice and common meanings. (5) The data were examined to identify interconnectedness of events, patterns that link themes and illuminate a shared meaning of the students' experience. (6) All interpreted findings were reviewed, reflected upon, discussed and confirmed by consensus with the five members of the research team. (7) The intent was to describe meaning in the texts as part of the larger whole and interpret the meaning from the context. The multiple stages of interpretation provided a means for analyzing the data (Diekelmann & Allen, 1989).

Findings:

Themes emerged from the data and a constitutive pattern evolved. Illuminating nursing situations brought to life the meaning of Community Health Nursing and contribute to understanding the importance of A S-L pedagogy in connecting research, practice and education. Interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology provided the

opening to understand the meaning of the participants’ experience of engaging in A S-L activities as part of their community health nursing course. The researchers identified 118 significant statements from the texts from which 25 supporting categories were developed. Then three relational themes were synthesized from the supporting categories and emerged as: (1) Reaching Out and Coming to Know; (2) Building relationships; and (3) Being Inspired. The three themes and the supporting categories are presented in Table 1. Finally, the constitutive pattern that links the themes was identified as *Bringing to Life the Meaning of Community*.

Table 1: Bring to Life the Meaning of Community: Relational Themes and Supporting Categories

Relational Themes	Supporting Categories	Description of categories
Reaching Out and Coming to Know	Outreach Knowing the community Taking the time Presence Meaning Understanding	Being present
Building relationships	Connect Coming together Transform Respect Trust Sustainable Community Cultural beliefs/sensitivity Imagination Inspiration Advocacy Enhance learning	Connecting
Being inspired	Compassionate educator Listening/hearing the calls “touched my heart” Knowledge Meaningful Creativity Reflective	Inspired to be compassionate

Reaching Out and Coming to Know

Developing the community project with my community group was an amazing experience. As we went out on our community assessments we found so many people asking us to help them learn more about their diseases or had questions about a medication. It impressed on me the importance of reaching out to the community and providing them with the health education they wanted.

The researchers interpreted Reaching Out and Coming to Know from the participants' descriptions of the importance of being present. Reaching out is defined as going to where people live, work, play, or go to school to understand their strengths, concerns and hopes, and dreams. The participants' descriptions revealed knowledge building as caring with the community as each comes to know the other. Students' coming to know community responds to calls for nursing from each other. This response can address a need or contribute strength and find ways of meaning. Taking time to know your community can provide challenge as students advocate for health. Hearing this call is an opportunity for the student to make a difference as he/she presses forward. The participants described the need to find new ways to support people with different perspectives when reaching out. Success in a community project is "knowing you gave your full attention to everything you attempted to do". It was interpreted to be fully present to listen for the calls for community caring.

Students coming to know the community work together responding to community concerns while they practice nursing grounded in caring. Students expressed a desire for a healthy community that will look out for each other. In its most developed version, this is a call for information sharing based on the most fundamental principles of communication: genuine dialogue, mutual respect, and mutual responsibility. The theme Reaching Out and Coming to Know signifies the meaning and understanding between the calls for community caring and academic learning. Reaching Out and Coming to Know, as a relational theme, was interpreted from the categories including outreach, knowing the community, taking the time, presence, meaning, and understanding.

Building Relationships

Our community project helped connect my classroom study of community nursing to the real world of community nursing. We were able to address the needs of the community and find an interactive way of caring for the community.

The researchers interpreted Building Relationships from the participants' descriptions of structure while connecting to the community and building real world cultural relationships within the community. Culture is valued as an expression of respect that undergirds academic service-learning. The participants were open to learn and grow. In the caring occasion, cultural values are reflected in expressions of respect for the other and transforms into building a trusting relationship.

Building relationships was promoted by understanding the cultural practices in each of the chosen communities. The student participants found opportunity in building relationships by first observing and interacting personally with the individual and community members. The individual and community are understood as expert in their own care and the student as expert in nursing. Respect for persons carries an openness to learn and grow with the community partners. The community assessment

findings of both strengths and challenges then prompted a health education strategy as for the project that students and community mutually agreed upon.

Transforming classroom study to real world practical experience became cultural learning for many community experiences. Students passionately described coming together and finding gaps in academic and actual lived practices. In many cases transforming within was resolved first by finding interactive explanations. Answering the real life problem moved students outside the classroom and had an impact on their community.

The hope for a sustainable community was inspired as service learning was enhanced by academic and service integration. Building relationships as a relational theme, was interpreted from the categories including connect, coming together, transform, respect, trust, sustainable, community, cultural beliefs/sensitivity, imagination, inspiration, advocacy, and enhance learning.

Being Inspired

The community had to trust us in order for the activities to take place. I loved our role compassionate educator Caring for the children in so many ways was very rewarding and inspired us to work hard for them.

The researchers interpreted Being Inspired from the participants' descriptions of the role to be a compassionate educator. Reflections on community nursing practice assist student participants to discover, articulate, and express experiential learning through the narratives of their experiences. The participants described an appreciation for the needs of the community and caring with the community members that was purposeful. The community health nursing student participants? experienced purposeful learning related to providing care with the community. Through reflection the participants were able to enhance their knowledge, professional skills, and humanity as they were relating to the people in their care, the instructors, and themselves. The statement "touched my heart" expressed a deeper sense of caring and knowledge of what it means to practice as a community health nurse. Learning theory in the classroom that promoted community caring in partnership was evident as the participants described their experience. In this manner the participants made sense of? their work and experience in theoretical ways. An increased awareness of what it means to nurse in a community experience by exploring the issues of concerns from the students and the community's perspective together in an all-at-once opportunity is to experience caring in the moment of being truly present for the community.

The student participants came to know that nursing is nurturing the wholeness of persons and environments through caring and being with the community. Being inspired as a relational theme, was interpreted from the categories including compassionate educator, listening/hearing the calls, "touched my heart", knowledge, meaningful, creativity, and reflective.

Discussion:

The following students' poem *Making a Difference* re-presents A S-L as an aesthetic experience and makes palpable Deepak Chopra's words "...and when we blend this unique talent with service to others, we experience the ecstasy and exultation of our own spirit..."

Making a Difference

*A call for nursing is one that you share
 We worked with the community providing care
 Our journey was composed of working with SWAT
 We put forward our effort and gave it a shot
 Working with the students to put on a pep rally
 Our ideas were flowing, we couldn't keep tally
 Educating students to avoid smoking
 Was a serious matter, with no joking
 Working with teachers and the students of SWAT
 Made a difference and taught us a lot
 As nurses we educate as a form of prevention
 And we loved what we did, we forgot to mention
 Our journey is over now, but we had a blast
 We hope we made an impression, and that it lasts.*

In hermeneutic phenomenology, personal experience is the starting point. The source of personal experience in this study is a description of the influence of A S-L pedagogy on undergraduate nursing students' understanding of community health nursing. The participants' reflection of their experiences caring for the community led to the structure of meaning of the text in terms of meaning units described as relational themes: Reaching Out and Coming to Know, Building Relationships, and Being Inspired. The constitutive pattern that links the three relational themes was identified as Bringing to Life the Meaning of Community. The CNPM guided the students along the pedagogical path of A S-L that led to sustainable action of community partners and nursing education.

Although the students' data include references to the positive impact their projects had on the community, data were not collected from community partners or members of the community. Future research should focus on the meaning of the A S-L projects for all participants: students, partners and individuals. These data can serve as project evaluations and provide direction for future plans.

Academic service-learning is more than a volunteer activity; it integrates community service with instruction and reflection. It is designed to enrich the learning experience through hands-on activity and to teach civic responsibility. A S-L requires students to

apply what they learn in the classroom and to reflect on their experiences by thinking, discussing, and writing about them. It teaches students how to apply academic knowledge to real-life civic issues, promotes teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, develops life skills, and makes learning more personally meaningful.

But this is a beginning point of coming to know a community so as to understand its strengths and hopes and dreams for wellbeing. The shift from a charity-based paradigm to a transformative paradigm requires a commitment on the part of faculty to direct learning activities beyond the “doing to” to “being and doing with”, and refocus thinking upstream to examine social problems and possible solutions. This type of learning has to occur over time and may require a curriculum revision to develop A S-L projects over multiple semesters. Sustained engagement in a community will influence outcomes for all participants. In the nursing situation about Mary, we are left not knowing the effect of having a supportive nursing student presence nor the health promotion on tobacco avoidance.

The Community Nursing Practice Model (CNPM) provides a framework for the seamless integration of community nursing practice and A S-L and the shift to a transformational paradigm. The transcendent and actualizing values of the CNPM direct nursing services and care focused on the individual/community. The creative application of nursing knowledge for innovation and reflection supports and sustains the commitment to collaborate and build community partnerships. Participatory action methods (Parker, Barry & King, 2000) bring together community members and nurses, each expert in specific knowledge, each an equal partner.

The CNPM provides a specific lens to envision the wholeness of community caring and its usefulness can bridge the theory-practice gap. Although focused on nursing practice it can be easily understood by other disciplines and provide a unifying structure for interdisciplinary practice. The values grounding the CNPM are familiar to most related disciplines and the respectful approach to care can inspire being with community to come to know the community. Co-creating community caring with community members can help shift the notion of “interventions” in response to needs and transform the idea of community caring into a co-created nursing practice. Rather than caring for, caring with in partnership with the community can be transformative.

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