Institution: University of South Carolina Aiken

Title of Project: Increasing Undergraduate Psychology Students' Knowledge of Key Concepts and Awareness of Community Needs through Service Learning

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Establishment Date of Project: 9/2009

Unit That Administers Project: USCA Psychology Dept

Total Number of Students Involved: ~ 90 per year

PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS REGARDING THE NOMINATED PROJECT
(Insert your response after each question; the response to each question should be no more than one page)

1. **For purposes of this competition, the Commission on Higher Education defines service learning as college student learning at any level and in any situation that is *linked* in a direct, hands-on fashion to the resolution of a problem or concern in a target community outside the institution *and is related* to a college course with some type of reflection activity. How does your project meet the parameters of this definition?**

       Balancing the needs of community organizations with student learning objectives in a way that enhances both is a prime goal of service learning projects. The concept of service learning implies a balance between the service component and the learning component. The service engaged in by students needs to be authentic and must meet important community needs (Ndura, 2007). Qualitative research has found that community organizations were appreciative of the extra manpower provided by students and found students to be enthusiastic and committed to the organizations' missions and goals. This research has also emphasized the importance of active involvement and close monitoring of students by project faculty (Ndura, 2007).

       Our service learning project, within the Psychology Department at USC Aiken, provides undergraduates service learning experience working with elementary school students in an after school, community based reading clinic. The children who attend the reading clinic, called Our Reading Orienteering Club (ROC; Clanton Harpine, 2003), have been referred by teachers and parents who are concerned about the children's difficulties in reading at grade level. The majority of the children are in 1st through 3rd grade, but some are a bit older. Local schools do not have the extra resources needed to provide the additional help these children need to remediate their reading deficiencies. Further, many of the children who attend ROC are from at-risk backgrounds characterized by poverty and single-parenthood, with families unable to afford the fees charged by traditional after school programs. The program is run entirely by volunteers. The ROC director, Elaine Clanton Harpine, does not draw a salary. Undergraduates from USC Aiken constitute the bulk of the volunteer staff and without them the program would be unable to exist.

       We regularly assess several outcomes relevant to the undergraduates who participate including: understanding and application of course concepts, implications for career choice, civic mindedness, and empathy. One component of our assessment process involves review of students' reflection on their semester-long experience. We also use a stand-alone end-of-semester questionnaire to gauge the added value of the service learning requirement over and above traditional course requirements. Children's progress in reading, spelling, and writing are also assessed at the beginning of the fall semester, during the holiday break, and again at the end of the spring semester. Results have shown that many of the children make great strides toward reaching the goal of grade level proficiency.

2. **Specifically, which segments of the college/university community does your project involve?**

    Our service learning project is implemented in all sections of USC Aiken's Developmental Psychology course. PSYC 310 typically draws students from a variety of majors including psychology, nursing, sociology, and exercise science. This is a survey course that covers normal developmental processes from conception through death and so covers a good bit of material. I have included a required service learning component since 2009. Students are required to spend 8 hours outside of class working with the children at the after school program. Since I instituted this requirement, I have been evaluating the effectiveness in an experimental pre/post design. Results

from a multiple choice exam given at the end of the semester consistently suggest that USCA students gain a deeper understanding of course related terms and concepts that they have been randomly assigned to focus on in their reflective journals.

3. How many students (specify degree levels to the extent possible) does the project affect?

We typically offer three sections of Developmental Psychology (PSYC 310) per year with about 30 to 35 students in each section, for a total of 90 to 100 students per year involved in service learning. For the past three years, the service learning project has been a required component of all sections of PSYC 310. The majority of the students are sophomores and juniors, although some freshmen and seniors may enroll.

4. **Describe the target community or communities your project serves.**

Approximately 30 children attend Our Reading Orienteering Club (ROC). These children have been referred by teachers, community agencies (e.g., Christ Central, Boys and Girls Club), and parents who are concerned about the children's difficulties in reading at grade level. The majority of the children are in 1st through 3rd grade, but some are a bit older. Local schools do not have the extra resources needed to provide the additional help these children need to remediate their reading deficiencies. Further, many of the children who attend ROC are from at-risk backgrounds characterized by poverty and single-parenthood, with families unable to afford the fees charged by traditional after school programs. Some of the children have been identified as having a specific learning disorder in reading, or have been diagnosed with a psychological disorder. These are children who often *fall through the cracks* without the added supports of programs like ROC. This is a free program for children in the community, and all costs to run the program are donated. The program is located in downtown Aiken, SC.

The ROC is a group-centered after-school prevention program that combines learning and counseling in the same program (Clanton Harpine, 2008). Group-centered prevention programs stress the rebuilding of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) and employ group counseling techniques that focus on building cohesive group interaction (Conyne & Clanton Harpine, 2010; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The group-centered approach also demonstrates how intrinsic motivation can be applied in a learning and counseling setting (Deci, 2009; Deci & Ryan, 1985), thereby allowing students to apply and work with intrinsic motivators. The group-centered approach also incorporates and applies some of the newest neurodevelopmental research on experience-dependent learning processes, particularly as it applies to rebuilding brain cells and retraining children who are failing in reading (Bryck & Fisher, 2012; Foorman, Breier, & Fletcher, 2003; Meyler et al, 2008).

Undergraduate service-learning participants constitute the majority of the staff at the RO Club. When they arrive at the service learning site, they are assigned to work at one of eight learning center workstations. Each workstation has a notebook that contains the instructions and tasks to be completed for that day. Each session lasts for two hours, and the children work at all eight workstations at each session. Tasks change at each session, so there is always something new and challenging for the children to work on. Tasks include practicing and learning a vowel cluster, capturing tricky words, and using creative art projects to motivate children to work and overcome their learning problems. The after-school program is written as a complete program packet (Clanton Harpine, in press). The volunteer's job is to help the children read and follow the directions at each workstation.

5. **Describe your project's effectiveness in helping to solve the problems or concerns in the target community.**

Children's progress in reading, spelling, and writing are assessed at the beginning of the fall semester, during the holiday break, and again at the end of the spring semester using standardized assessments that measure both grade level and number of errors (Morris, 2005). Some of the success stories in recent years include the following:

- A student who failed for nine straight years in public school is now reading.
- A student diagnosed with ADHD and failing in reading moved up two grade levels in one year.
- A student diagnosed with dyslexia and whose parents tried everything, including expensive private one-on-one tutoring, was able to learn to read for the first time and moved up to beginning chapter books in one year.
- Six children who started the year at the pre-primer level (pre-K) ended the year reading at the 2nd grade reading level.
- One student started the year at the pre-primer level (pre-K) and ended the year at the third grade reading level.
- This past year, one student started in September reading below first grade level. The student ended the year reading at the fourth grade level.
- This fall, four students moved up an entire grade level in reading in 3 ½ months.

A recent analysis of program effectiveness included 18 of the children from the program. By ethnicity, 61.1% of the students in the study were African American and 38.9% were European American. 72.2% of the students were boys. The children ranged from kindergarten to fourth grade. The schools identified 5 of the students as having attention problems (ADHD), 3 were identified as autistic (ASD), 1 student was identified with dyslexia, 1 had uncontrolled epilepsy, and 9 of the students had been labeled by the schools as having classroom behavior problems. One student came to the program from the county's alternative school because of uncontrolled classroom behavior. Sixteen students read below grade level when they started the program. Three of the children started the program unable to even read one or two words. Thirteen students who attended the program had been retained at least once. Paired sample *t* tests were used to assess the improvement in scores from one time to the other. Results showed significant improvement in all 4 areas (spelling, reading, comprehension, and sight words) from the pre-test to the mid-test, from the mid-test to the post-test, and overall (from pre-test to post-test). All tests were significant at the 0.01 level.

Analysis of the data shows consistent improvement in students' reading performance relative to the pre-test in each of the four areas (Spelling, Reading, Comprehension, and Sight Words) over the period of study. Lack of a control or comparison group, however, prevents us from determining how much of this improvement was due to participation in the Reading Orienteering Club. We acknowledge that students' reading improvement could be due to a variety of factors. The results seen here are consistent, however, with a previous study (Clanton-Harpine & Reid, 2009) which did show significant gains of the treatment group over the control group. The results of this case study indicate that a community-based after-school program can be a positive factor on the impact of reading performance.

6. **Describe the degree to which your project enhances student learning while providing specific examples of the service learning activities the college students engage in. Also explain how the service learning activities reinforce or apply what the college students learn in the classroom.**

One way that USC Aiken student learning objectives are assessed is through evaluation of journals in which students document their activities, reflect on their experiences, and interpret their interactions applying course-related terms and concepts. Prior to their service learning experience students are provided lists of relevant terms to use in the completion of their journal entries, with different terms randomly assigned to one-half of the students. Examples of class-related terms and concepts included resilience, experience-dependent brain growth, reinforcement, working memory, zone of proximal development, scheme, temperament, cognitive self-regulation, learned helplessness, externalizing problems, and dyslexia. Analysis of student journal entries revealed that many students are able to correctly apply course-related terms and concepts. The following paragraph from a student journal provides a good illustration (course-related terms have been bolded):

> On my second visit, I assisted with the rocket ship building station. At this station, the children attached written words they had previously learned in the other stations to the body tube of the rocket (made from a paper towel roll). I noticed one child, "J," that needed individualized attention. As soon as I interacted enthusiastically with J, he surprised me with his ability to learn new words. By adjusting the assistance I offered J to fit his current level of performance, also known as **scaffolding** (Berk, 2014, p. 237), I enabled him to become more confident and produce quick results. As J's tasks became too challenging, I would give some assistance by providing associations with words he had already learned. In doing so, J manipulated an older **schema** by taking the combination of letters and their sounds that form the word "play," remove the "L," and adjust this existing schema - also known as **accommodation** (Berk, 2014, p. 119) - forming the word "pay." Another tool J used to acquire the word "pay" was to sound out the word, which is taught in the **phonics approach**. This approach, which is the only approach used at the ROC, teaches children to interpret basic symbols and their sounds (Berk, 2014, p. 241). Additionally, this is a more logical approach to teaching reading because as we read we learn sounds, not letters (Harpine, 2013, p.12). This is exactly what J did as he broke down the words into smaller units of sound (**phonemes**), he could then decode by first sounding out the consonant and then combining it with the AY phoneme. He then took the word and associated it with a common cultural phrase he had previously heard as he said, "Oh! Like getting paid! Money!" This when I knew that J had truly learned something new.

Further, evaluation of student journal entries provides the opportunity to review and provide feedback when students misunderstand course-related terms and concepts. For example, the following comment suggests that this student had interpreted brain plasticity as a limitation that hindered, rather than facilitating, learning.

> Overall there was some improvement from Monday, but I did notice that some children did not have much improvement. This could be attributed to **brain plasticity**, where some functions have not yet been set in their brain, which leads them to not learning spelling as quick.

Greater awareness of different ways students misunderstand course related terms and concepts may help instructors correct the misunderstandings and facilitate more appropriate application.

7. **Is there academic credit associated with the project (not necessary for submission)? If so, please explain the particulars.**

   Service learning is a required component of PSYC 310 Developmental Psychology. In the past few years, students have been required to participate in order to pass the course.

8. **If funding is required, how is the project funded and what is the approximate annual budget for the project?**

   Presently, we are funded by St. John's United Methodist Church, primarily the United Methodist Women (UMW). St. John's offers free classroom space. For 2015-2016, the UMW gave us $2,200.00 to hire two USC Aiken student interns to train and assist with the program. Church members donate school supplies: paint, writing paper, pencils, erasers, construction paper, glue, etc. Another expense is healthy after-school snacks for the children. Several Sunday School classes and individual families have donated to the program this year to help us purchase books, snacks, and supplies for the children. The total from Sunday School classes and families was $800.00. Our budget is approximately $3,000.00 per year. Dr. Clanton Harpine donates the program curriculum and her time. The USC Aiken School of Education supports the program with photocopying and occasional supplies.

9. **Add any other comments you may have about your project.**

You may also include supplemental information about the project (such as brochures, pictures, etc.).

Please return this form via e-mail by **February 26, 2016**, to:

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