

SERVICE LEARNING IN AN ABBREVIATED COURSE IN PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN

By Susan E. Dutch, Ph.D.

For the last three years, I have had the opportunity to teach my Psychology of Women course during the two-week intersession. Along with the opportunity came challenges, not least of which was how to keep the Serving Learning component a significant part of the curriculum.

A significant component of the regular course is for students to take some positive action to help women in need. During the full semester course, students are required to volunteer 4 hours a week for 10 weeks helping an oppressed or disadvantaged individual or group. During the 16-week semester, students volunteered in such places as the Boys and Girls Club, the YMCA, the Governor's House (a local nursing home), the Senior Center, and New Beginnings (a local shelter for women and children).

Students are required to keep a journal of what they do and how they feel about their action. This culminates in a written paper that includes the student doing research on the problem, its prevalence and possible solutions. A final section of the paper includes how students have changed over the semester, especially with respect to their identification as a "feminist".

With some modification of its format, the action project continues to be an integral part of the course. Since it is not possible for individual students to each put in 40 hours of one-on-one volunteering in the span of just two weeks, the action project has been transformed into a group effort.

The first night of class, the action project is discussed and agreed upon. For the last two years, students have chosen to collect food, gift certificates, toys, toiletries and clothes for New Beginnings—the local shelter for battered women and children. The students collected these items in various ways: from their own closets, from area merchants, from friends and relatives, from colleagues at work. When items were brought in, they were placed in my office. Then, on the last night of class, all the items were brought into the classroom, counted and put into boxes for delivery. This is the first time that students saw all of the items together. Even though most individuals reported feeling that their contribution was small and insignificant, they were amazed at what the entire group accomplished in just 8 days. This year, it took three vehicles to carry all the items!

While a journal is no longer required, students still write the culminating paper, with additional sections describing what their individual contribution was, how they felt about it, what the entire group accomplished, and their thoughts and feelings about that. Through this project, students learn about the power of group action. The hope is that such experiences will lead to increased involvement in social action in the future.

Service Learning is especially valuable if it can be a focal point of the curriculum. In a course on the Psychology of Women, this was accomplished by having students learn about domestic violence and engage in an action that helped women and children at a local shelter. With some flexibility and innovation, Service Learning projects can be an important component of even the briefest of courses. It just takes a little creativity. I hope this has helped spark yours.