Outcomes of Service Learning in Athletic Training Education: A Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Approach

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INTRODUCTION

According to CAATE accreditation standards athletic training curricula must provide students with experience with "clinical education" in a general medical setting to broaden students’ understanding of comprehensive healthcare. This learning opportunity is also tied to coursework which explores general medical care content as it pertains to allied health care professionals, such as athletic trainers. Prior to 2009, Athletic Training students (ATS) at our institution were offered a general medical experience which included interaction with a very limited patient population. We were looking for a way to broaden the students’ experiences with diverse patient populations. Thus, we developed an affiliation with a free community-based clinic and piloted an experience in which students practiced the skills they were taught in class and learned through a group of nurses during five-week rotations. After reflecting on outcomes from the pilot period we found it necessary to prepare our students more fully in order to carry out expectations of the community partner. In addition we found students needed to gain a better understanding of course content, its connection to the service experience and to the discipline, as well as gain a greater sense of civic responsibility. We recognized a need for systematic inquiry regarding the efficacy of our service learning initiative. Cross (1996) encourages faculty to use their classrooms as a venue for studying student learning through discipline-based inquiry about a relevant problem. Bass (1999) further argues that scholarly investigation of a classroom problem is the foundation of the Scholarship of Teaching and is not the means to an end, but the beginning of scholarly discourse about teaching and learning. With these findings in mind, as well as a desire to facilitate a sense of civic responsibility and help the student connect the relevance of general medical and service learning experience with person and professional goals, we purposefully revised the general experience and associated service experience utilizing a service learning pedagogical approach. Thus, in order to see if we met desired outcomes, we conducted classroom research following a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework. According to O’Loughlin (2006), research questions for a SoTL project should be “concise”, avoid using “ambiguous” terminology, and should define specific, obtainable objectives. Thus based on these characteristics we defined our research question as follows: In what ways are students’ values, knowledge and skill sets broadened through complementary direct service learning experiences and classroom activities within course A283 – General Medical Issues in Athletic Training.

PROCEDURES

Eighteen first-year students (10 male, 8 female) participated in an IRB-approved mixed methods research project during the 2010 spring semester. Data collection included, 1) knowledge surveys which assessed students’ professional values and perceived skill level prior to and after the service experience, 2) an individual and trio reflective interview sessions to gain a “benchmark understanding” (Bass, 1999); 3) individual reflective journals before, during, and after the service experience.

Quantitative Data

Each item on the Knowledge Survey (Nuhfer & Knipp, 2003) was scored using a 5 point Likert scale. Section 1 included 16 items related to professional values identified in the field. The sum of the 14 items were calculated to determine Section 1 score. Section 2 included items related to patient intake skills (patient history and vital signs). The scores for the 24 items were calculated to determine a Section 2 score. Two separate paired t-tests were used to determine differences between the pre and the post survey results, one for each section.

Qualitative Data

Data from interviews and reflective journals were analyzed via inductive content analysis using Atlas.ti software. Trustworthiness was assured via methodological triangulation and member checks.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data

Results of the paired t-test identified no significant difference between the pretest and posttest survey results for either Section 1 (p = .27) or 2 (p = .12).

Qualitative Data

Preliminary results indicated that ATS felt trusted and respected by patients and volunteer staff, such as nurses, and that the community partner provided a positive learning environment overall. In addition they perceived their service benefited the community partner in a variety of ways such as basic skills and knowledge which facilitated patient care offered by physicians as well as the overall operation of the facility. Primary themes that emerged indicated that while the service learning experience led to numerous positive outcomes, barriers to successful learning and professional growth. Data were mixed with regards to whether the class and the service experience complemented each other and thus facilitated an understanding of course content. The following preliminary themes and associated student quotes demonstrate student professional and personal rewards from the service learning experience as well as barriers to achieving desired outcomes.

PRIMARY ATS REWARDS

- Improved patient intake and interpersonal communication skills
- Legitimation by patients and staff which ultimately improved AT student self-efficacy
- Increased feelings of civic responsibility and cultural sensitivity
- Intrinsic fulfillment and personal growth

"Obviously taking vitals was a big one (benefit), but also being able to communicate effectively and gaining confidence of being on your own." (Leyi)

"The way the people perceive me is probably my favorite thing about working at VM. I was really nervous they would think that I was just a student therefore I wasn’t somebody they could talk to, trust, or knew what I was talking about. They really are thankful and grateful for the work you are putting in. They trust you with absolutely everything. They will talk to you as somebody they think can help them. I have become more confident because of these people. They are confident that I know what I’m doing therefore I am more confident in my work, I really think I owe them for this experience." (Sophie)

"This experience has taught me how to respect and understand people from all different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. I have learned about some of the problems that the community of Bloomington is facing, and I have met a lot of people that love volunteering their time to help the disadvantaged people. Overall, this experience has helped me to grow in all aspects of life." (Chris S.)

"…I feel special that I can help people out... I go home everyday feeling like I have made a difference in someone’s life." (John)

"I can say clinically it has made me amazing at taking vitals...it has given me so much confidence in my work...this has really made it easier for me to talk to people older than me with confidence, which has always been a problem for me...coming from a strong conservative background it has definitely made me test my will power to not judge people...socially it has made me become more accepting and understanding." (Sophie)

BARRIERS TO LEARNING & GROWTH

- Lack of patient follow through and engagement in advanced learning about disease
- Uncertainty of service purpose and its direct relationship to athletic training
- Ambiguity related to professional values (Responsible citizen vs. Social responsibility)
- Lack of class reinforcement for some students

"This experience was helpful in learning class material but at the same time you don’t really know that patient’s talk with the doctor was and what the final diagnosis was." (Jason)

"The classroom experience taught me the skills to perform the skills. The classroom did not help much outside of that aspect..." (Alex S.)

"No, I did not see any athletic training aspect while at VM. I feel like I did a nurse’s job and not athletic training related tasks." (Zora)

DISCUSSION

Service learning is a pedagogical approach in which educational objectives are linked with service-based experiential learning within a community. Students involved help meet needs of the community partner while gaining further understanding of the course and discipline as well as a sense of civic responsibility (Bringle and Hatcher, 1999). Athletic training students at our institution benefited from service learning by developing professionally and personally. In particular, focused pre-service instruction as well as direct service learning which provided authentic experience with patient intakes, successfully improved students’ perception of their intake and interpersonal communication skills as well as professional self-efficacy. Authentic experiences have been shown to be valuable and educative for athletic training students (Mench and Ennis, 2002). ATS participating in authentic service experiences felt trusted and respected by patients and clinical staff. As supported in the socialization literature (Klossner, 2008), trust by socializing agents, such as clinical instructors and patients, leads to affirmation or legitimation in the student’s developing professional role thus leading to increased feelings of self-efficacy. In addition, service learning literature discusses the idea of civic professionalism and how adding a dimension of civic responsibility to professional preparation influences socialization into professional fields (Battistoni, 2002; Sullivan, 2005). Students participating in our research reported several feelings of responsibility and cultural sensitivity. While these findings support that service learning can enhance educational outcomes for AT students, our systematic inquiry helped us learn many lessons which will assist us with improving the course and ultimately future student outcomes.

As emphasized in SoTL literature, it is important to publish or present teaching and learning research in order to determine the effectiveness of given teaching interventions toward achieving desired student outcomes (Bernston & Bass, 2005). Furthermore such scholarship should occur within the context of specific disciplines (Cross, 1996; Healy, 2000). This SoTL project has shed light on how we can improve the service and relate our experience to enhance outcomes for ATS. Lessons learned from our SoTL research include:

1. Facilitate learning classroom content more readily through increased student engagement during patient and physician interactions.
2. Help students make better connections between the course objectives and service experience through more authentic course activity and assessments. Adequate time in class is a necessity.
3. Survey students’ perception of skills, knowledge, and professional values upon immediate entry into the ATEP as well as just prior to and after course interventions in order to evaluate outcomes fully.
4. Consider how service learning and civic-minded value development relates to program mission and objectives. Educate all students, faculty and clinical instructors about ATEP mission and objectives.
5. Emphasize the need for further research specific to service learning, professional values and other issues of civic professionalism among athletic training and other allied health professions.