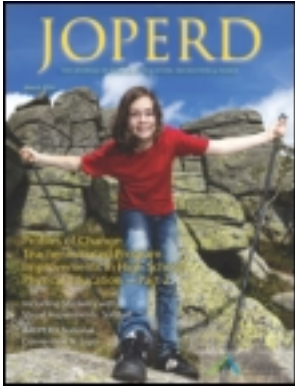


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A Framework for the Design and Implementation of Service-learning Courses

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A Framework for the Design and Implementation of Service-learning Courses



MEREDITH A. WHITLEY
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Over the past two decades, there has been a push for colleges and universities to step outside of the ivory tower and become more engaged with their surrounding communities, thereby helping with local needs and concerns (Fitzgerald, Burack, & Seifer, 2010). One way for colleges and universities to increase engagement is through experiential and active learning strategies, through which students have “hands-on” learning experiences in the community. To enable these experiences, there has been an expansion of partnerships between colleges and universities and community agencies, organizations, and schools. In fact, a recent feature in *JOPERD* explored the dynamics of promoting sustained school–university partnerships as one form of community engagement (Patton, 2012). Although these partnerships take many forms, an increasingly common school–university partnership is service-learning. According to Bringle and Hatcher (1995), service-learning is:

A course-based, credit-bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Service-learning occurs in a wide range of fields, including nursing, child development, and teacher education. Within the fields of kinesiology and physical education teacher education, there have been a growing number of courses and curricula that utilize

service-learning as a pedagogical strategy. For example, service-learning courses have been used to conduct a youth fitness program (Petersen, Judge, & Pierce, 2012), to provide physical activity opportunities for children with disabilities (Richards, Wilson, & Eubank, 2012), and to teach physical education to low-income students (Meaney, Bohler, Kopf, Hernandez, & Scott, 2008). These courses match the growing belief in our field that service-learning is the way of the future, with calls for further implementation of service-learning to benefit students, faculty, institutions, and community partners and members (Petersen et al., 2012).

While the increasing number of service-learning courses is an exciting and innovative trend, these courses and curricula are often constructed, implemented, and evaluated without a strong framework based on literature in our field. This is one of the most consistent critiques of service-learning courses outside of our field as well (Aronson et al., 2005; Roldan, Strage, & David, 2004), suggesting that there is a need for a strong framework based on literature that can help guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of these experiences. This guidance will give the service-learning courses

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academic rigor while also maximizing the benefits for participating students, faculty, institutions, and community partners and members.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will provide a framework that was developed based on literature in the field of service-learning. Second, it describes a specific physical activity program that serves as the community-service component for a university-based service-learning course. This service-learning course was field tested with the framework, providing a real-world example of a high-impact, successful service-learning course.

The framework was created based on two existing conceptual models (Aronson et al., 2005; Roldan et al., 2004), with additional components added based on research findings that emerged after these two models were developed (see Figure 1). The framework provides the necessary structure to the design, delivery, and evaluation of service-learning courses, from basic information about the students (context) and the service-learning experience to the mediating variables of reflection and cognitive complexity. Last but not least, this framework also includes the potential student outcomes.

The community-service component of this service-learning course is a physical activity-based youth development program, called the Kinesiology Career Club (KCC), with the primary goal of helping youth from underserved communities to envision and explore their positive “possible futures” (Walsh, 2012; Walsh, Veri, & Scobie, 2012). The program is an extension of Hellison’s (2011) teaching personal and social responsibility (TPSR) model. The KCC includes TPSR’s focus on building strong teacher–youth

relationships that value individuality and focus on emotional, social, and physical well-being and development. Another similarity is that both TPSR and the KCC are empowerment-based by giving youth opportunities to have a voice in the program’s direction, strive for leadership positions within the program, and evaluate themselves and the program throughout the experience.

The more specific youth-focused goals of the KCC include the following: (a) enhance the TPSR goals of respect, effort, goal-setting, and leadership in the program and the connection of these goals as important for their future; (b) address potential future hopes and fears; (c) maximize motivation in school and beyond; and (d) chart the necessary steps toward becoming a professional in kinesiology followed by the necessary steps for their own career(s) of choice. To reach these youth-focused goals, the KCC progresses through four sequential phases. Phase 1 introduces the various physical activities through the TPSR daily format and strategies, along with focusing on the first two levels of the TPSR model: respect and effort. Along with building relationships with the youth and emphasizing youth voice, the undergraduate students and professor introduce the field of kinesiology, with the undergraduate students explaining their decision to pursue a career in this field. In Phase 2, the youth are empowered to take on the advanced TPSR responsibilities of goal setting and leadership within the KCC, while also exploring a career in at least one of the many subdisciplines of kinesiology. This exploration enables the undergraduate students to make the connection between success in a kinesiology career and the physical activities, goal setting,

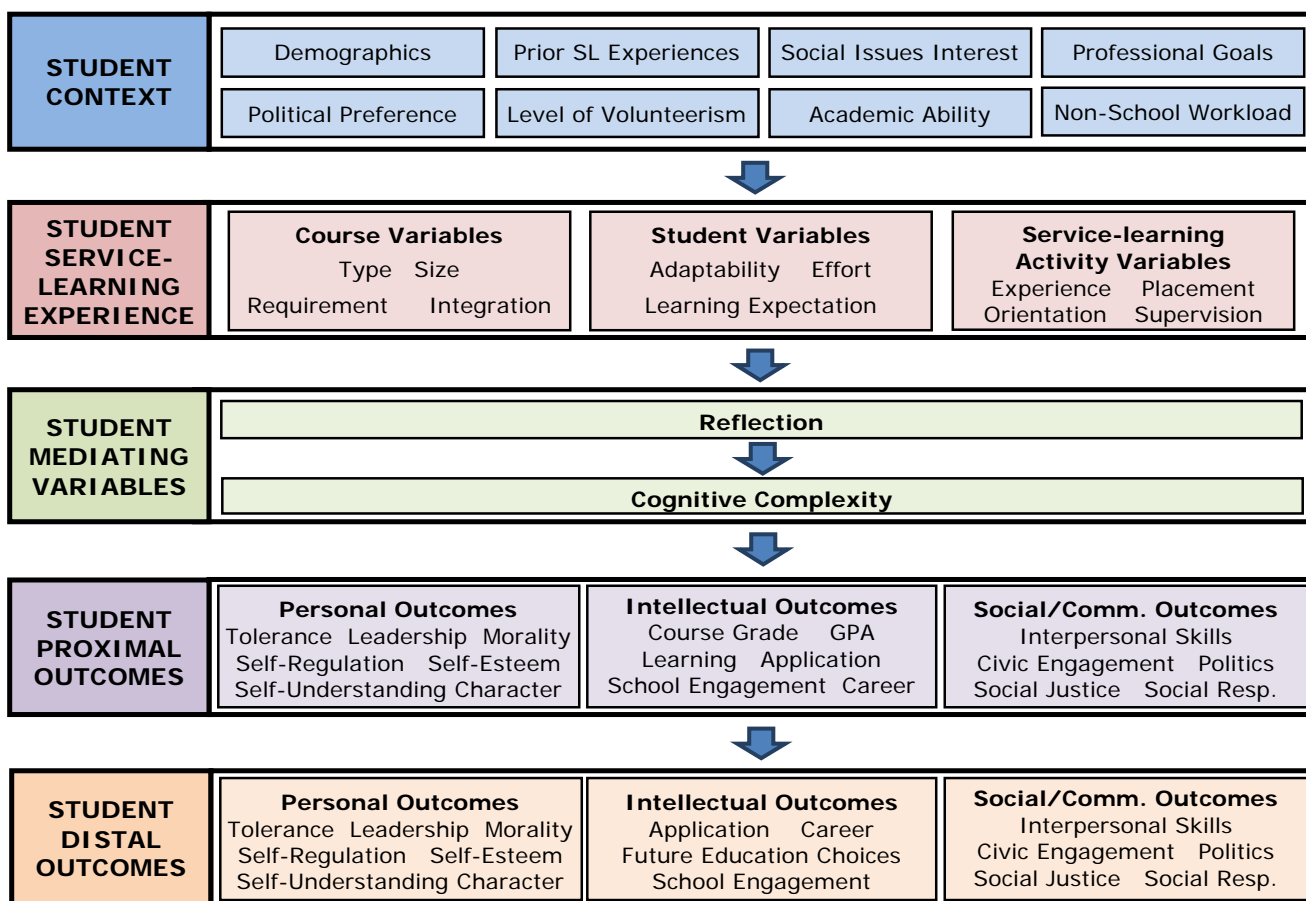


Figure 1.
Service-learning framework

and leadership they are experiencing in the KCC. Phase 3 extends the goal-setting time and leadership roles with more responsibility, along with asking the youth to begin exploring their own future careers of choice. The undergraduate students and professor also introduce the importance of having both potential hopes and potential fears, as suggested by the theory of possible selves, and the need for adequate preparation, a positive attitude, and a strong work ethic to be successful. Lastly, in Phase 4, there is a focus on the final level of the TPSR model: transferring the responsibilities they have learned to settings outside of the gym. The youth complete their plans for how they may pursue their careers of choice, and the undergraduate students and professor further reinforce the connection between following their career paths and the TPSR levels, along with their awareness of their possible futures.

The KCC runs during a physical education class in a low-performing inner-city high school on the West Coast, with approximately 12 to 15 youth selected to participate each semester. A university professor from a large metropolitan university has dual roles as the program director of the KCC and the instructor of a service-learning course where the undergraduate students enrolled in the course help run the KCC each semester. The undergraduate students are kinesiology students who can sign up for the course during their senior year as a capstone experience.

During each KCC session, there is a combination of large-group activities (e.g., warm-up, stretching, martial arts, and weight training), small-group activities (e.g., stations with different activities, such as dance and fitness), and self-directed activities where the youth choose to independently work at one of the many stations previously mentioned. The undergraduate students enrolled in the service-learning course participate in each session, at times leading the students through activities and at other times helping them learn how to lead themselves. After the physical activity, the group debriefs in one large circle, reflecting on the quality of that session and the students' performance with Hellison's (2011) TPSR levels of respect, effort, self-direction, and/or leadership. Finally, the undergraduate students meet with the one or two "mentees" they are matched with for the entire semester to focus on the youth's personal growth and exploration. This is a critical component of the KCC, as this is when the undergraduate students build relationships with the youth and serve as mentors to help them contemplate their possible futures and take responsibility for their path in life.

Given the focus of this article on the design and implementation of a service-learning course based on a framework, the various components of the service-learning course will now be explored within the levels of the framework. However, additional information about the design and delivery of the physical activity program in the urban high school can be found in Walsh (2012).

Framework Context

University students have certain characteristics that influence their experience during the service-learning course and their learning outcomes (Aronson et al., 2005). These characteristics include basic demographics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and cultural background, as well as academic ability, interest in the subject matter, and previous experiences in the community. In order to better understand students' background at the beginning of a service-learning course, instructors are strongly encouraged to conduct preservice evaluations (e.g., interviews, personal narratives, guided group discussions). The course instructor

will then be able to: (a) prepare the students for their individual experiences in the service-learning course (e.g., suggesting guided readings for each student based on their background); (b) support the students throughout the service-learning course (e.g., with frequent check-ins with each student and through small-group meetings); and (c) guide the students through targeted questions. Since the service-learning experience is such a personal journey, these strategies allow course instructors to provide the individual support and guidance necessarily for a meaningful experience.

The KCC Context

At the beginning of each semester, the university professor, who is the service-learning course instructor and the KCC program director, asks each interested university student to complete a written paper answering a number of questions about their background. After reviewing these forms, the university professor then interviews each student one at a time to gather information about the student, including their past and current sport experiences and their professional goals. The university students are asked to describe their physical activity background and rate their ability to teach the various KCC physical activities. This is an important step, as the university students need to be competent in performing and teaching at least one of the four main KCC physical activities (i.e., martial arts, weight training, dance, fitness). They are also asked how they believe they can help high school youth, how they feel about working with youth of a different gender and ethnic background than their own, what challenges they anticipate, and how this experience can affect their own life. This information enables the professor to get to know the students, targeting guidance and feedback as they progress through the service-learning course.

Framework Course Variables

Moving to the second level of the framework, every service-learning course is different, which means that course instructors must understand their specific course variables. These include the discipline, department, college, and level of the course as well as the size of a course. Ideally, course instructors should try to maintain smaller class sizes or at least oversee small-group discussions in larger courses, allowing more opportunities for group discussion and critical reflection. It is also ideal for the service-learning course to be voluntary rather than mandatory, as this increases the likelihood that students will participate with a higher degree of intrinsic motivation, enthusiasm, and interest. The final course variable is ensuring that the service-learning experience is truly integrated into the instructional objectives of the course (e.g., connecting the academic course work to the service experience), which will have an impact on the service-learning experience and, ultimately, on the student outcomes (Roldan et al., 2004).

Course Variables for the KCC

The course variables for the KCC service-learning course begin with the fact that this is a credit-bearing course within a kinesiology department in a public metropolitan university on the West Coast of the United States. The course has only seven to nine undergraduate students enrolled each semester, with the students choosing to take this kinesiology service-learning course. As can be seen from the projected student-learning outcomes outlined in the course syllabus (see Table 1), the objectives focus on the integration of course

content with the service-learning experience. In fact, outside of an initial preparatory meeting held at the beginning of the semester and a final meeting at the end of the semester, the students do not meet with the professor off-site at any other time to discuss the readings and course content in a typical academic setting. Instead, the students are completing the course readings, reflecting on the readings, and reflecting on their own experiences at the service-learning site through weekly reflection journals. Students then use this information in their service activities in the program. All in all, this is a small class where the service is truly integrated with the course content.

Framework Service-learning Activity Variables

Moving to a focus on the service-learning activity variables, students need to have personal contact with community members, as well as with the clients being served (Aronson et al., 2005; Roldan et al., 2004). Ideally, students will be working hand-in-hand with community members in their service-learning activities, leading to a greater understanding of the community members and the opportunity to build relationships with these individuals. Another critical component of a strong service-learning course is ensuring quality placements for each of the students. Students will give more effort and gain more from the experience if they perceive the activities and their role as interesting, important, and challenging (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Another important variable is the preparation of students before the service-learning experience, as students who are more prepared are more likely to have positive outcomes (Aronson et al., 2005). Preparation often includes guided readings, group discussions, and individual meetings with the course instructor to become more familiar with the course content and develop a better understanding of the community, clients, and community partner. The instructor must also focus on developing strong relationships with the students, including group and individual feedback on the students' performance in the service-learning activities, understanding of the course content, and quality and quantity of reflection and cognitive complexity. Without strong supervision, students are unlikely to gain much from the experience and may actually experience negative outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

KCC Service-learning Activity Variables

Since more students apply for this service-learning course than can be accepted, the professor is able to interview the students to determine which ones will be the best fit for the KCC ("placement" in the framework). Since the high school that the KCC is held at is diverse, as is the student population of the university where the service-learning course runs, diversity is taken into consideration when selecting the best students for the class (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender, nationality). It is also important to select the students who seem best suited for working with youth in the KCC, so additional positive characteristics include good interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, a positive and upbeat personality, and an interest in helping youth with physical activity and beyond. By exploring these factors within the student-context portion of the framework, the university professor has a better understanding of the students' backgrounds before the semester even begins, which enables him to select the students who are the best match for the KCC.

Once the university students are selected for the KCC, they meet once with the program director off-site and begin to prepare for the program. This preparatory meeting includes a brief class

discussion about the service-learning site, the format of the KCC, and the students' thoughts and feelings regarding the experience. The students also begin reading articles published about the KCC as a means of preparing for the service-learning experience, along with the supplementary text, *Youth Development and Physical Activity: Linking Universities and Communities* by Hellison and colleagues (2000).

As for the experience of the university students in the KCC, they are heavily involved in the design and implementation of the program. Before and after each session, the university students meet with the program director to discuss the status of the KCC and any issues, concerns, or ideas. Throughout the KCC, and especially during these meetings, there is an understanding that they are working in partnership with the program director, with both parties being equally responsible for and invested in the program's success. There is regular dialogue between the program director and the university students, with feedback from the students often leading to changes in the KCC. In other words, the students have an important, meaningful role within the KCC, where their voices are valued. They are also very active in the program, resulting in a sense of ownership toward the KCC. The final variable within the service-learning experience is the supervision that the university students receive from the university professor. Because he is present at each and every session, the university students receive feedback during their meetings before and after the sessions, as well as through their weekly reflection journals.

Table 1.
Service-learning Course Objectives

- Create developmentally appropriate physical activity-based lesson plans that reflect the components, strategies, and philosophy of TPSR and KCC.
- Understand the goals, strategies, and phases of the KCC.
- Plan and teach TPSR-based physical activity lessons with outcomes in the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains.
- Be able to explain and teach various kinesiology concepts through TPSR, resulting in a broader appreciation and understanding of the kinesiology discipline.
- Understand and implement a progression of the four KCC phases.
- Demonstrate knowledge and proficiency in the various physical activities taught in the program.
- Reflect on and analyze the various KCC and TPSR concepts, leading to a greater understanding of the course content.
- Challenge current professional goals and processes for including social justice and other community-based work in your future.
- Mentor high school students in envisioning their positive possible futures.
- Understand the connection of TPSR and KCC to the field of youth development.
- Reflect on how the KCC is meeting an identified need in the high school and in the community.

Framework Student Variables

The student variables portion of the framework is based on the adaptability, effort, and learning expectation of the students throughout the service-learning course. The students with the highest degree of adaptability and receptivity are more likely to have a positive experience in the service-learning course and demonstrate more positive outcomes at the conclusion of the course. With proper supervision and reflection (which will be discussed later), students are more likely to be adaptive to change and receptive to feedback from others. The degree of effort put forth by each student is also a critical piece of the puzzle, since the degree of effort strongly influences the students' experiences in the service-learning course and their outcomes upon completion. This means that course instructors need to be aware of the effort put forth by each student, with encouragement given when necessary. The degree of effort can also be part of the grading scheme within the service-learning course, if the course instructor thinks that the students need an additional incentive.

KCC Student Variables

The university professor who runs the course has dual roles as the course instructor of the service-learning course and as the program director of the KCC. This is atypical for what usually occurs in a service-learning course. Generally, service-learning course instructors are able to focus solely on the service-learning course, with their students participating in service activities in the community that are supervised by other individuals. With the university professor running the KCC, the students get to learn from the experienced professor during each program session, experiencing his excitement, passion, and vision for implementing various youth-development concepts. The professor is also able to individualize their needs, tailor their skills to the activities in the program, and help them throughout the program. The downside is that the university professor has the additional role of running the KCC for the youth in the program and of developing and continuing a university collaboration with the teachers and administrators at the site. The youth component is the professor's priority during the KCC, sometimes leaving many teachable moments and feedback to the university students before and after the program time.

Framework Mediating Variables

Reflection has been shown to be the most important part of the service-learning experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Reflection helps students to integrate and make meaning of their service-learning experiences through activities such as faculty-led discussions, discussions among students, and written assignments (e.g., journals, papers, essays; Eyler, 2011). Without careful reflection, meaningful learning may not occur, and the student outcomes may be drastically different (Eyler & Giles, 1999). If rigorous reflection is supported throughout a service-learning experience, this can lead to enhanced cognitive complexity, which is the next step in the service-learning framework.

If service-learning experiences are well designed and provide strong reflective activities, students can develop critical-thinking skills that can lead to powerful outcomes (Aronson et al., 2005). Through high-quality service-learning experiences with an adequate quantity of quality reflective activities, students who confront challenges to their world views may examine alternative

perspectives and can develop their critical-thinking skills (Eyler, 2011; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

KCC Mediating Variables

To help the university students to reflect on the service-learning activities in the KCC, they complete three written documents each week that provide an opportunity for reflection: (1) written reflections about the course readings, (2) written program observations (see Table 2 for specific questions), and (3) written reflections on the mentoring sessions with each youth (see Table 3 for specific questions). Moving on to the second mediating variable, critical-thinking skills can be enhanced through participation in a service-learning course, provided that the service-learning experience is well designed and the reflection activities are effective. So, as the university students participate in the KCC, interact with the high school students, complete the readings for the course, and, most importantly, reflect on these experiences through their guided reflections in their journals and on their own, their critical-thinking skills should be enhanced.

Framework Outcomes

A fairly consistent pattern has emerged from the growing body of literature demonstrating a significant effect on students, ranging from immediate outcomes to long-term outcomes (Aronson et al., 2005; Eyler, 2011). The student outcomes are grouped into three general areas: personal outcomes, academic and intellectual outcomes, and social and community engagement outcomes (Eyler, 2011; Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Personal outcomes include positive changes in self-understanding, self-esteem, tolerance, leadership development, and moral development. Academic and intellectual outcomes range from enhanced grade point averages and achievement of curricular goals to increased commitment to their education. Finally, social and community engagement outcomes comprise enhanced social outcomes (e.g., interpersonal skills, social self-confidence) and increased civic engagement and responsibility.

KCC Outcomes

Students enrolled in the KCC service-learning course have reported growth and development as a result of their experiences, although

Table 2.
Weekly Program Observation Questions

- How did the participants respond to the instructors and program? Describe their behaviors and attitudes.
- How did the participants handle their responsibilities?
- Are the participants getting a better sense of their future?
- What contributions has this youth work made to your life?
- Are you properly preparing for each program session?
- What new physical activities or physical activity concepts did you teach this week?
- How can you improve your performance in the program?
- What have you learned from the participants?

Table 3.
Weekly Mentoring Session Questions

- How did you connect Phases 1, 2, 3, or 4 to kinesiology and/or other possible careers? What did the participants say?
- How did you connect being successful in kinesiology to being successful in other possible futures? What did the participants say?
- What did you say about the career(s) you are pursuing and/or their possible careers? What did the participants say?
- What did you say about what helps and hurts your future and/or their future? What did the participants say?
- How did you describe having a healthy balance of both “hopes” and “fears”? What did the participants say?
- How did you connect what they are currently doing in school and other areas of their lives to their futures? What did the participants say?
- What new steps did you add to the participants’ ongoing chart?

the students varied significantly in terms of the number, depth, and complexity of these immediate outcomes (Whitley, 2012). The reason for these differences is that students’ context, service-learning experience, and mediating variables have a significant impact on their outcomes. In the personal domain, the students often experience significant leadership development, along with enhanced self-understanding, self-esteem, and tolerance. In the academic and intellectual domain, the students generally feel that most of the knowledge acquired through the service-learning course can be applied in their future personal and professional lives. Within the final domain of social and community engagement, most students demonstrate substantially improved interpersonal skills. Some students also become more knowledgeable about social justice issues, including issues in underserved communities and the need for outreach programs for young people in these communities.

Conclusion

The newly developed framework presented in this article provides the structure and rigor needed for the design, delivery, and evaluation of service-learning courses. The service-learning course linked with the KCC serves as a real-world example of a high-impact, successful service-learning course within the kinesiology field that utilizes this framework. This is encouraging, as there is a need for enhanced rigor in the design, implementation, and evaluation of service-learning courses in our field, ultimately leading to optimized benefits for students, as well as the participating faculty, institutions, and community partners and members. Therefore, it is hoped that practitioners, researchers, and administrators will find both the framework and the corresponding program description

to be a concrete guide for the design and implementation of their own service-learning courses and curricula, a framework for future research efforts, and an informative model for administrative decisions.

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