Illustrating positive psychology concepts through service learning: Penn teaches resilience

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Available online: 12 Dec 2011
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(Received 18 April 2011; final version received 23 September 2011)

We describe an undergraduate service-learning research course in which undergraduates are trained to disseminate an intervention designed to promote resilience and well-being in middle-school youth. The course provides undergraduates with an opportunity for active and collaborative learning in psychology and serves as a new model for the wide-scale dissemination of evidence-based prevention programs through supervised undergraduates. We provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the course, along with some thoughts about ways that readers might implement something similar at their own institutions, using the Penn Resiliency Program or other related interventions.

**Keywords:** teaching of positive psychology; service learning; adolescents; resilience; education

In the spring of 2009, we offered an innovative service-based research experience course for the first time at the University of Pennsylvania, redesigning the department’s standard undergraduate psychology course to include hands-on, real-world experience. In this course, titled ‘Penn Teaches Resilience,’ undergraduate students learned about the theoretical bases of both cognitive-behavioral and positive psychology-based interventions, and then received training to administer a manualized cognitive-behavioral intervention, The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP; Gillham, Reivich, & Jaycox, 1990), to middle-school youth attending an after-school program in Philadelphia. As part of the course, students also collected and analyzed feedback data.

The goals of this article are to (1) provide an overview of our rationale both for service learning in general and for resilience as an ideal topic for a service-learning course in positive psychology, (2) describe the course for readers in sufficient detail that they might model a similar course at their own institution, and (3) provide some insights based on our experiences teaching this course at two institutions, including suggestions for how it might be improved.

**Why service learning?**

Service-based learning has been described as a ‘course-based, credit-bearing educational experience that allows students to (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’ (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995).

Research on service-learning courses suggests that the integration of learning and service can have many beneficial effects on students. For example, a review of service-learning courses suggests that these courses can facilitate personal growth such as the development of a sense of personal efficacy, personal identity and moral growth, as well as interpersonal growth such as the development of communication skills, leadership, and the ability to work well with others (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). Reviews of these courses also document several benefits to students’ learning and engagement in school, such as increased complexity of understanding, critical thinking, cognitive development and satisfaction with their school (Eyler et al., 2001). In addition, service-learning courses provide students with meaningful opportunities to help others and can strengthen the connections between academic institutions and the surrounding community (Eyler et al., 2001). For these reasons, faculty and administrators are often eager to develop and offer service-learning courses.

There has been a movement toward the development of increased service-learning and practicum courses in many undergraduate psychology curricula (Bringle & Duffy, 1998; Vandercreek & Fleischer, 1984). Across many universities, courses have used
service learning to teach a wide range of topics within psychology such as child psychopathology (Glenwick & Chabot, 1991), developmental psychology (McCluskey-Fawcett & Green, 1992), and abnormal psychology (Scrogin & Rickard, 1987). Service-based courses offered within the psychology department help ground psychological theory in the reality of contemporary society, and engage students in the application and illustration of psychological concepts through active and collaborative learning (Bringle & Duffy, 1998).

Furthermore, evaluations of existing service-based psychology courses suggest that undergraduates benefit from hands-on experience teaching psychological interventions. At UCLA, an established service-learning course (The Developmental Disabilities Immersion Program) offers students an opportunity to study developmental disabilities by combining traditional classroom teaching with service to individuals with disabilities (Fluharty & Kassaie, 1998). Evaluations of this program, which has been in existence for over 20 years, suggest that it increased students’ self-confidence, sense of achievement, and personal insight, and often had a significant effect on their attitude toward community involvement (Fluharty & Kassaie, 1998).

While service learning shows promise for a variety of courses in psychology, it is a pedagogical approach that fits particularly well with the framework of positive psychology. Hands-on experience can provide opportunities for growth by exposing students to new experiences and pushing students beyond the comfort zone of the academic classroom. In so doing, service learning provides opportunities for students to develop, discover, and apply skills and strengths that may not be called upon in typically classroom-based work. Because service-learning projects typically require a team effort, service learning also can help to promote interpersonal skills and positive relationships among students, between students and faculty, and between students and faculty and their community partners. Finally, service learning provides opportunities for meaning through connections and contributions to others.

Overview of a service-learning course on resilience

This course was taught at the University of Pennsylvania for two years as an advanced course in psychology that served to fulfill the major’s research requirement. It had three prerequisites: introductory psychology, abnormal psychology, and one semester of statistics. Because the course was, first and foremost, a research experience course, undergraduates were trained to teach the program as well as to evaluate its effectiveness. The course contained 18 students in the first year and 11 students in the second year.

Course preparation

Service-learning courses typically require extensive preparation and lead time, as well as ongoing logistical support. Given the logistical demands of setting up and running a service-learning course, we recommend hiring a teaching assistant, if possible, to serve as a liaison to the site and assist with logistics. During the course of the semester, there were often ongoing logistics that required continued collaboration with the site, such as addressing scheduling conflicts or reporting behavioral problems that arose. A teaching assistant is invaluable for negotiating these issues.

It is helpful if logistics are arranged before the start of the semester; so that undergraduates can receive training and immediately begin running the intervention. The first step in establishing this course was contacting and collaborating with local communities. This course was run in collaboration with a local after-school program serving middle-school youth in a poor urban community in West Philadelphia. We arranged with the after-school program coordinators and the school social worker for undergraduates to work with youth at the after-school program. The school’s social worker was instrumental in the initial establishment of this course, expressing support and helping create a working alliance with the after-school program coordinators. The social worker was extremely receptive to the program, expressing concern about the inadequacy of mental health resources available to students and his hope that a prevention program might help target risk factors before problems arise. Dissemination of interventions to youth can also be done in collaboration with schools, community centers, or clinics. However, we highly recommend working within an existing infrastructure, such as an after-school program, as doing so can provide a pre-existing group of participants who are available at the same time every week. Other logistics to be considered include transportation for undergraduates to service sites or supervised transportation for youth to your academic institution. While it can be more logistically challenging to invite youth to a university campus, in our experience, this added an element of excitement for the youth and served as an added incentive to join the program.

Once we established a partnership with a site, the next step was recruitment. This can be challenging given the number of activities that youth are involved with after school; so, it was important to collaborate with each site to determine the best method of informing parents and youth. We found it beneficial to hold an informational meeting with parents in which the goals, structure and content of the intervention were described. Many parents voiced questions and concerns about the nature of the program, which we were able to address in the information session. We found that these sessions helped spark parental interest.
and increased the likelihood of parents encouraging their children to participate. Information sessions can also be held for the youth themselves, in which the intervention can be described and framed to them in a way that is fun and relevant.

While the task of making these arrangements may seem daunting at first, once made, community ties can often be maintained from year to year, requiring far less preparatory work. In addition, working closely with the community in the creation of the course can be a rewarding process in its own right, providing a better understanding of the needs and nuances of the local community.

**Training**

At the beginning of the semester, undergraduates received 6 h of training in the philosophy and rationale of the intervention. Training began with the reading of primary sources on the design and efficacy of the PRP (see Gillham, Brunwasser, & Freres, 2008 for a review). We then provided an overview of the intervention itself. The activities in PRP fall into two broad categories. The **cognitive skills** consist of techniques like thought disputing and cognitive reappraisal; for example, the kids learn about different common thinking errors and learn to notice when they are making these errors themselves so that they can challenge them. The **behavioral skills** consist of skills for social problem-solving, building assertiveness, and coping with stress. These activities are outlined in greater depth by Gillham et al. (2008).

PRP has a structured curriculum, including a group leader’s manual and workbooks for students. The curriculum includes detailed lesson plans that outline the activities, discussion questions and main points of each unit. The curriculum also includes an example script, to serve as a model for running groups. Students are encouraged to use the script to become deeply familiar with the lesson plans and to then develop their own style and voice in leading the lessons.

Undergraduates received weekly training before each session from the course instructor, in which they reviewed and practiced leading the manualized lesson they would be teaching that week. They then broke into smaller groups of two co-leaders to role-play sections of the lesson. During these weekly supervision meetings, undergraduates also voiced difficulties and challenges they faced in the previous session and brainstormed with their classmates and the course instructor about how to best handle them. In addition, undergraduates participated in the planning of the following week’s session by helping design additional interactive activities and games to engage the youth. In this sense, the input of the undergraduates, many of whom had previous experience working with youth, was extremely helpful to the program’s success.

**Intervention implementation**

The undergraduates taught the program to 19 middle-school youth at a school near the University’s campus. The program was taught as part of an existing after-school program for community youth. Sessions were held once a week for a total of eight 90-min sessions, amounting to a total of 216 h of service provided to the community through this course. The teaching assistant attended the group lessons and helped to supervise the intervention. The social worker who coordinated the after-school program also provided support by occasionally joining sessions and helping address behavioral issues that arose.

Each lesson began with a short game or activity that was prepared by the undergraduates and conducted with the entire group. The students then broke into their designated small groups, with two undergraduates and two youth working together in each group. Each group engaged in discussions and activities based on the weekly PRP lesson. These groups of four were small enough for youth to feel comfortable sharing, but large enough to maintain a flow of conversation. Children received a snack during their group meeting. While all groups met at the same time and in the same room, each group spread out and found its own space within the room to allow for privacy and group cohesion.

**Structured reflection**

Structured opportunities for reflection are a central component of service-learning courses, and so it is important to create opportunities for both ongoing and retrospective self-reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Eyler et al., 2001). Undergraduates were asked to keep an ongoing journal of their experiences throughout the course, which they used to inform discussions in weekly supervision meetings. They also used their journal entries to add a personal reflection component to their final paper; in this written report, undergraduates worked to integrate and compare their own experiences with the data collected by the class.

**Program evaluation**

In order to evaluate the success of the program, at the end of the last session, students distributed feedback forms to youth, asking them to rate their satisfaction with the program and the extent to which they learned different skills. Youth completed these forms anonymously. The undergraduates then collected and analyzed these data, and then wrote up their findings, along with a literature review on the rationale and efficacy of PRP, in an APA-format paper at the end of the semester. Each undergraduate developed their own research questions and used the data to answer them.
(e.g., ‘Is there a correlation between attendance and program satisfaction?’ or ‘Does gender predict which skills youth learned the most?’). The research paper component was required in order for the course to be consistent with the department’s ‘Research Experience’ course model.

Problems encountered

One challenge that often arises when working in collaboration with after-school programs is attendance. Many children attended the program inconsistently, which made it difficult for them to establish relationships with their mentors and to complete the resilience curriculum. In addition, some undergraduates expressed that they felt uncomfortable and anxious at the start of the program as they were pushed to step out of their comfort zone. While some had previous experience with youth, many were nervous about the prospect of running an intervention. As such, it is extremely important to provide adequate support and guidance to undergraduates and to create a space for them to voice concerns and reflect about their experiences. Another challenge in this type of course is that when working in real-world settings, many factors are outside of one’s control and it is not uncommon for setbacks and programming changes to occur that might disrupt a planned schedule for the intervention. However, despite these challenges, the benefits of this university–community partnership are numerous for both the youth and undergraduates involved.

We also had some issues around our decision to follow the ‘Research Experience’ course model. Because students did get hands-on experience with a research-based intervention and learned much about the logistics of conducting and evaluating a psychological intervention, the decision to include a research paper requirement seemed appropriate at the time that we created the course. However, in practice, we found that the research paper was not feasible for two reasons. First, the students were far less prepared for this assignment than we had anticipated; they struggled with every aspect of the paper, from writing the literature review to entering, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting data. We simply did not budget (and, in fact, could not have budgeted) sufficient time to walk students through the process. Second, the time that we did budget was significantly compromised by logistical setbacks such as recruiting kids and obtaining their consent, transportation to and from the after-school program, and weather issues. It is our impression, having now taught several iterations of this course at multiple placement sites, that such delays and setbacks are both inevitable and unpredictable. Thus, we have concluded that this course may be more appropriate as an elective or ‘special topics’ course rather than a ‘research experience’ course. This is not to say that grounding in the research is not valuable – we considered it, and still consider it, a central aspect of our training. However, we believe that the inclusion of both structured reflection and a research paper resulted in neither assignment receiving adequate attention.

An alternative model

It may be helpful to instructors hoping to offer an intervention-based service-learning course to hear briefly about an alternative model for offering such a course, outside of the ‘research experience’ paradigm used at the University of Pennsylvania. In spring 2009, a similar course ran through Swarthmore College, but in the form of a practicum course open to advanced undergraduates (juniors and seniors) who were majoring in psychology and/or educational studies.

As at Penn, students learned about the theoretical and empirical background of the intervention and practiced the intervention lessons during class meetings. Students also ran an after-school program for middle-school students in the community. At Swarthmore, the program was advertised to parents through flyers distributed at area schools, but the groups were conducted on campus at Swarthmore College rather than through an after-school program in the community. Youth walked or took the bus to the college after school. They walked home or were picked up by parents following each lesson. Groups met once a week for eight lessons. Youth were divided into two groups based on grade level (sixth grade versus seventh and eighth grade). Three undergraduate students led each group of five to eight students. The program was based largely on PRP, but included additional lessons designed to help students identify and use their character strengths.

In the past two years, this course has expanded. Students who are currently enrolled in the course deliver a resilience and strengths-based intervention (based largely on PRP) as a weekly after-school program in three schools in the Philadelphia/Swarthmore area. In addition to examining feedback and feasibility data, we are gathering data that will allow us to examine the effects of this service-learning course on adolescents’ social and emotional well-being.

Future directions

This model of a service-based research experience course can be replicated at any university. To create one’s own intervention-based service-learning course, the authors recommend the following steps: choose an effective intervention to disseminate, and an appropriate population to whom the undergraduates will teach the intervention. It is also important to choose an
intervention that is appropriate for undergraduates to implement, namely an intervention that has structured materials and is preventive, focusing on teaching skills for promoting positive experiences or coping with everyday problems, rather than addressing clinical levels of symptoms that might require advanced clinical training to address.

Establish a positive relationship with the school or community in which you will work. It is important to note that it requires ongoing effort to maintain this relationship, such as staying in constant contact, remaining flexible to the needs of the community, and communicating with the program or site liaison. It can also be beneficial to work through existing organizations seeking to improve community partnerships. For example, this course was established through the help of the Netter Center for Community Partnerships. Organizations like the Netter Center now exist on many campuses and can assist in the creation and maintenance of community partnerships and can also be possible sources of funding.

Next, ensure that the undergraduates receive adequate training in the background and theory of the intervention. This includes providing reading and classroom discussions that address the underlying theory, history, and critical components of the intervention. Finally, create a structure for the continued supervision of undergraduates, and a forum for group reflection. Reflection can take place in the form of weekly journal entries or group discussions and should push students to consider what they have gained and what they have struggled with throughout the program, as well as how their experiences extend, clarify, or challenge what they have learned through their coursework.

If replicated on a large scale, this model of service-learning has the potential to engage undergraduate psychology students in active and collaborative learning, while simultaneously enlisting them to help address the growing mental health needs of today’s youth. We concur with Elias and Gambone (1998, pp. 159–160) that ‘service-learning programs meet the complementary needs of both the underserved and the undergraduate, and we encourage all universities to continue to develop and support such programs’.

References


