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**Learning through service: A course designed to positively influence
students' disability-related attitudes**

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Abstract

This article describes a service-learning course designed to 1) encourage students to critically evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about individuals with disabilities and 2) heighten their awareness of social justice issues related to disability. Students are trained to provide one-on-one job support and career mentoring to youths with intellectual disabilities working on the university campus. Rather than simply memorising information from a textbook, students in the course develop their own understandings of disability issues through ongoing interactions with and reflection about the youths they are supporting.

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How can we, as teacher educators, encourage preservice teachers (candidates) to develop an awareness of disability issues? How do we prepare them to look beyond labels to appreciate the individuality, strengths, and potential of each student they will encounter in their classrooms?

This article describes a service-learning course at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, USA, that was developed in response to these questions. Because the attitudes and beliefs of preservice teachers will inform their decision-making and professional practice throughout their careers (Renzaglia, Hutchins, and Lee 1997), teacher educators have used service learning as a pedagogical tool to shape their thinking about diversity and disability-related issues (Gonsier-Gerdin and Royce-Davis 2005; Mayhew and Welch 2001).

Through a partnership with a career-technical high school, university students in the service-learning course are paired with high school students who have intellectual disabilities. The university students serve as job coaches and career mentors as these high school students complete a work experience on the university campus. The partnership was established to provide both secondary and postsecondary students with meaningful learning experiences outside the walls of a traditional classroom setting. University students who enrol in the semester-long course are primarily preservice teachers or other students preparing for, or considering, careers in the disability field. The course is built around three interconnected components: classroom learning, experiential learning, and structured reflection.

Classroom component

Many students enter the course with limited experience interacting with individuals who have disabilities and are initially apprehensive about their ability to work with the high school

students. Therefore, during the first several weeks of the semester, students are introduced to the conceptual and philosophical foundations of supported employment and vocational preparation programs that have been established for youths with disabilities. Course readings, in-class and online discussions, case studies, videos, and guest speakers help students expand their knowledge and repertoire of communication and employment support strategies. Throughout the semester, readings and discussions are closely linked to the learning experiences students are having with their high school partners, allowing them to make direct connections between theory and practice. A lesson on stereotyping encourages students to examine their preconceptions about the characteristics and abilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Students in my class are also prompted to observe and reflect upon the reactions of members of the campus community to the high school students.

Experiential learning component

Once students are equipped with strategies to provide one-on-one support to youths with disabilities, they apply these direct service delivery competencies in real-world settings. My students provide on-the-job support for their high school partners who work for two mornings per week for 10 weeks in positions such as information centre attendant, clerical assistant, and library materials access assistant. In their role as job coaches, the university students train the high school students to complete work tasks while simultaneously encouraging employees at the jobsite to train and support them as well. In their role as career mentors, university students help the high school students complete online career assessments and create PowerPoint presentations that showcase their vocational strengths, abilities, and interests. Students in my class also have time for less structured social interactions with their high school partners during lunch at the student union following each work shift.

A primary goal of providing authentic learning experiences is to promote critical thinking about matters of social justice related to disability. While, as the course instructor, I am pleased that my students learn to write task analyses, implement workplace accommodations, and provide positive behaviour supports, I am even more concerned that my students 1) recognise inequalities people with disabilities face in their freedom to pursue and achieve desired ends (Terzi 2005) and 2) develop a commitment to helping these individuals achieve their highest educational and quality-of-life potential. University students recognise when people stare at their partners in the student union cafeteria, they notice when wheelchair-accessible doors do not open after the automatic-open button is pushed, and they notice when worksite supervisors go out of their way to make the high school students feel included as valued members of the work team.

Reflection component

The impact of the service-learning experiences on students' thinking about disability-related issues is documented in, and monitored through, weekly reflective journals. Students are prompted to discuss the progress of their partners, experiences they viewed as successful and unsuccessful, and reflections about what they observed. One university student summed up her learning experiences during the course of the semester this way:

In a course such as this, it is nearly impossible to walk away unchanged, and I am no exception. Through this course, I have experienced personal as well as professional growth, and I wouldn't change the insight I gained for anything in this world. Over the course of this semester, I worked with Courtney Thomas [pseudonym] who is a young lady with a disability I am unsure of but capabilities that I believe in. (W. Oladokun, personal communication, April 24, 2008)

Similarly, the reflections of other students convey how their experiences encouraged them to make a personal connection with their partners, helped them explore the meaning of disability in society, and increased their confidence in meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities.

In summary, I find that students in the service-learning course benefit personally and professionally from participating, albeit momentarily, in the lives of youths with disabilities. Observing and developing personal relationships with their high school partners cultivates an understanding social justice and disability issues and encourages preservice teachers to become reflective practitioners. For a discussion of guidelines for incorporating service learning into special education teacher preparation programmes, see Mayhew and Welch (2001).

Jeanne Novak is an assistant professor in Intervention Services at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, USA. Her teaching and research interests relate to the transition of youths with disabilities from high school to employment and postsecondary education.

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