

A service-learning experience with the homeless, though not a perfect canvas, helps social work students connect the dots of research basics.

Learning About Social Work Research Through Service-Learning

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Abstract

Social work educators have struggled to find ways to encourage students and practitioners alike to engage in research. This project examines the impact of using a service-learning experience with a homeless agency on students' attitudes toward social work research. Quantitative methods were used to collect and analyze data on students' comfort and self-efficacy regarding social work research, and qualitative data informed the research regarding students' attitudes toward the service-learning experience as well as their learning experiences in general. Results indicated students' attitudes toward research improved over the semester and that they demonstrated learning through, found benefit from, and enjoyed engaging in the service-learning project. The authors conclude that service-learning can be a useful pedagogy for engaging students with social work research.

Research indicates that most social work professionals don't engage in scholarly research and when they do, don't publish their findings (Lazar, 1991). Preparing new practitioners to conduct research appears to be the most efficient way of addressing this problem. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) considers the mastery of research skills to be an important component of training competent and ethical social work practitioners.

While Secret, Ford, & Rompf (2003) argue that social work students have generally positive attitudes toward social work research, other researchers have reported that social work

students are reluctant to learn and conduct research (Epstein, 1987; Forte, 1995; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Satuffer, 2001; Montcalm, 1999; Wainstock, 1994). In addition, social work students appear to have higher levels of math anxiety than many other students (Royse & Rompf, 1992) and perhaps have less interest in research than students in related disciplines (Green et al., 2001).

Dunlap (1993) writes: "Social work educators must take the lead" (p. 8) in encouraging social work students to engage in research activities during their professional careers. She goes on to suggest that one way is to "use more effective teaching strategies, notably those that satisfy student preferences by linking research and practice" (p. 8). One such method that clearly links research and practice is involving students in research projects in the community, and several social work educators have advocated for its benefits in facilitating student learning about research (Hyde & Meyer, 2004; Kapp, 2006; Knee, 2002; Sather, Carlson, & Weitz, 2007; Wainstock, 1994; Wells, 2006).

This study proposes to evaluate the impact of a service-learning experience, one type of community engagement, on social work students' attitudes toward research. Specifically, through the context of a research course required for undergraduate social work majors at our university, we hoped to improve students' engagement with the academic content by involving them in a research project with a community partner agency in need of help with research. By examining changes in students' research self-efficacy and

attitudes toward research, we hoped to offer evidence that the service-learning experience contributed to their understanding and perception of the utility for research in social work practice.

Social Work and Service-Learning

Texas Tech University defines service-learning as

... a pedagogy that links academic study and civic engagement through thoughtfully organized service that meets the needs of the community. This service is structured by and integrated into the academic curriculum, which provides opportunities for students to learn and develop through critical reflection (<http://www.tltc.ttu.edu/servicelearning>, 2009).

Williams, King, and Koob (2002) and King (2003) suggest a natural “fit” between the mission and values of the social work profession and service-learning. Phillips (2007) argues similarly, noting that the profession’s central tenets of “values/ethics, diversity, social and economic justice, and social welfare policy and services” (p. 6) coincide ideally with those of the service-learning movement. However, while others have noted the issue, Phillips focuses on the fact that while “one would expect social work to be a foundational discipline of the [higher education civic engagement] movement and at the forefront of service-learning methodological development” (p. 6), the relationship between social work and service-learning is “tenuous,” at least currently. Certainly, few evaluation studies have been published. Lemieux and Allen (2007) found only eight examples which met criteria for service-learning in a recent review of the social work literature published since 1990.

One explanation postulated is the lack of clear differentiation between field experiences and service-learning. It is suggested that social work educators may overlook service-learning as a specific pedagogy because they assume all work in the community to be service-learning and/or that field practica are service-learning experiences (Lemieux & Allen, 2007). However, these types of experiences lack key components of service-learning. Community service alone fails to adequately link the experience of student service with academic content or provide opportunities

for critical reflection. Field experiences, while clearly applying academic content, lack the important idea of “reciprocity” in service-learning. As Phillips (2007) argues, students in the required field experience focus on honing their own skills in the provision of services. In other words, field practica are really about the students’ needs to practice providing services rather than on the needs of the community. Ultimately, it is the agency doing us (the university) a favor by providing this opportunity to our students.

Regardless of the reasons for most social work educators’ failure to use service-learning as a central pedagogy, others advocate for its increased use in social work courses. Service-learning has that capability of marrying theory and practice in a way that can potentially engage students and therefore, “there is reason to believe that the use of service-learning in social work education can greatly contribute to the positive academic outcomes and to the professional development of social work students” (King, 2003, p. 45).

Our Service-Learning Component

Our community partner, an agency serving the homeless, was a loose collaboration of concerned citizens, social service and religious providers, and others who were currently homeless or had been homeless. At the time of our involvement, they had no formal organizational structure, funding, or employees, so all work was conducted on a completely voluntary basis. Prior to the beginning of the semester, the first author was put into contact with the community partner through referral from the service-learning coordinator at Texas Tech University. The primary contact was with the volunteer coordinator of the annual homeless count, a rotating position. The annual homeless count is a national effort occurring in the early part of each year and is a project of the *National Alliance to End Homelessness* (2009). Communities involved in the endeavor attempt to collect data on the actual number of homeless as well as to conduct a more in-depth survey with those who consent. The community partner was seeking help in conducting the actual count (data collection) as well as compiling the data from the surveys (data analysis). This project was developed to offer the community partner information and data it otherwise could not afford to obtain professionally.

The purpose of the social work research course is for students to be able to “understand the methodologies of scientific inquiry and be able to apply the principles of the scientific method to the process of professional knowledge building, program evaluation, and practice evaluation” (Texas Tech University, 2007/8). The students’ involvement in the service-learning project consisted of data collection and analysis and dissemination of results. They participated on the “count” day by looking for and interviewing the homeless population in the local area one afternoon and evening early in the semester. They created a database in SPSS, entered data, and obtained statistical data from the surveys. At the end of the semester, they presented their results in the form of a PowerPoint and written report to the community partner and social work faculty members.

All work on the project was conducted under the supervision of the instructor (first author). Apart from the actual data collection, the majority of the work with data was conducted during class sessions. While the data entry was done individually by students, creating the database and running analyses (obtaining frequencies, creating graphs/charts) was done in groups of two or three students. The instructor would introduce the material in the computer lab and provide instructions on what to do. Students would then complete their tasks as a small group. Next, the instructor would compile the results of the different groups for the class as a whole. Students also completed an individual research assignment using the data. For this project, they conducted a literature review and conducted some type of statistical analysis. Throughout the semester, students reflected on the service-learning experience through class discussion and individual journals.

This study examines the impact of this experience on the students. The governing ideology was to evaluate the process of learning from the perspective of the student who learned to conduct social work research by actually performing it.

Methods

This study was approved by the Texas Tech University’s Institutional Review Board for research with human subjects. All requirements

were followed throughout the course of the study. At the beginning of the semester, students gave written consent for the quantitative survey and were informed of their rights to refuse to participate without repercussion. A childhood address and a phone number were used as identifying data to match pre-tests to post-tests, avoiding use of student names. At the end of the semester, students were asked for consent to use the qualitative data sources, given the stipulation that the instructor would not have access to information about which students consented until after grades were posted. The second author, who was a graduate student in another discipline with no formal power over the participating students, held this data until that time. Students were given course credit for completing journal entries and for participation in the chat session, regardless of content or consent to the research.

Sample

Twelve female students were enrolled in this undergraduate level course during one long semester of 2007. Ten students filled out both the pre- and post-survey questionnaires. Of these, seven students were social work majors, while the remaining three were minors. Seven students were white, while one was Latino/a, one African-American, and one indicated s/he was of mixed ethnic heritage. While the course only requires a statistics course as a prerequisite and is open to any student on campus who fulfills this requirement, social work majors typically take this course toward the end of their program, generally the semester before their field placement.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative attitude survey data was collected from all the participating students at the beginning and end of the semester. The second author attended class, explained the research, and collected the consents and surveys.

Measures. The quantitative measures included two scales addressing students’ attitudes toward research. The scales were adapted from Szymanski, Whitney-Thomas, Marshall, & Sayger, 1994; Unrau & Grinnell, 2005; Holden, Barker, Meenaghan, & Rosenberg, 1999. The first scale (named Comfort) addressed students’ level of ease with research activities and the utility of social work research. Students were asked to

indicate their level of agreement with statements such as “The thought of having to understand research articles makes me nervous” and “Many research findings are slanted in order to appeal to funding sources” on a six-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. There were 19 total items and nine items were reverse-coded so that higher scores indicated more positive responses. Items were summed for a total score, with a possible range of 0-95. A reliability analysis of these items on the pre-test resulted in an alpha of .88 in our sample.

The second scale addressed students self-efficacy regarding research (Efficacy). Students were asked to rate their level of confidence on a 100-point scale in carrying out various research activities, such as “Design and implement the best measurement approach possible for your study of some aspect of practice.” A rating of 0 was anchored as “cannot do at all,” 50 as “moderately can do” and 100 “highly certain can do.” There were 16 items on the original scale. However, one item had a mistake on the questionnaire which resulted in four students skipping the item; therefore, it was excluded from further analysis. The mean of the 15 items was obtained for an overall scale score (Unrau & Grinnell, 2005). Holden et al. (1999) found the measure to have good internal consistency, construct validity, and sensitivity to change. In our sample, a reliability analysis of these items on the pre-test items resulted in an alpha of .92.

Data Analysis. SPSS 15.0 was used to create a database of the quantitative data and for all subsequent statistical analysis. A level of significance of .05 was used to interpret the results of statistical tests. Cohen’s *d* was used to estimate effect size using a guide of 0.2 for a small effect, 0.5 for a medium effect, and 0.8 for a large effect (Cohen, 1992).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Two sources for qualitative data were used. Throughout the semester, about seven students made entries in individual journals kept online. Students responded to questions about the service-learning project and academic content posted on WebCT. For example, after setting up the database and entering the data, students were asked to reflect on this part of the process by responding to this entry by the instructor:

For this journal entry, comment on the lab exercises so far. (1) Do you understand how to set up the SPSS file? What did you find problematic about the survey or SPSS in regard to this part of the research process? (2) How about the data entry? Were the surveys easy to code or difficult? What was problematic? What would you do differently next time?

As previously noted, students were given course credit for making entries in their online journal; however entries were not graded for content.

Additionally, a chat session was conducted at the end of the semester through WebCT, an online learning support program, with the second author as moderator. The moderator posed a series of open-ended questions about the service-learning experience and gave students a chance to respond to the question as well as one another’s comments. Example questions include: “Do you think the experience contributed to your understanding of the course material?” and “If you were the instructor, would you use this kind of approach again?” The chat session was held during a regular course session, but students could participate through any computer with Internet access and the course instructor was not a participant or present. Again, students received course credit of attendance for the session (noted by the second author), but content was not considered for grading in the course.

The data collected from these two sources were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Independently, the two researchers read and re-read the text data before noting initial impressions. Then together we reviewed these initial impressions, discussed differences, and decided upon the emerging themes. Chunks of data were then grouped under similar codes and examined again for overarching themes.

Results

Both quantitative and qualitative data was used to assess the impact of the service-learning experience in the course. Quantitative data consisted of the two scales, Comfort and Efficacy, while the qualitative data consisted of student journals and a transcript from an online chat

session.

Paired-sample t-tests were used to test the quantitative research hypotheses. Results indicated that the students significantly improved ($t(9)=-2.34, p=.044$) their level of comfort with research from pre ($M=65.14, SD=11.9$) to post ($M=75.48, SD=9.44$) testing. The effect size was fairly large ($d=.74$). Similarly, students' self-efficacy regarding research activities also showed significant positive change ($t(9)=-4.09, p=.003$) from pre ($M=69.83, SD=15.05$) to post ($M=84.60, SD=10.54$) testing. The effect size was large ($d=1.3$), supporting the research hypothesis predicting change.

Student Journals

The main purposes of the journals were to allow students to share their experiences and to make connections between the academic material and the project. Two major themes were identified in this data, including 1) feelings and attitudes and 2) learning and engagement. Both are best viewed through a time-wise analysis over the course of the project.

Feelings and Attitudes. Students expressed both feelings and attitudes about the service-learning project in their research journals. In the early entries, the most commonly occurring feelings were anxiety and anticipation. The majority of comments noting anxiety were made before the work had begun. For example, a few students felt some early discomfort in regard to the actual service-learning aspect of the course, for example: "When I first heard about the service-learning project and the subsequent research, I was wary. Working with made-up data seems slightly less intimidating than having to go out into the community to collect the data and then have the analysis of that data actually used by an agency."

Others expressed apprehension because of the population to be researched. One student wrote, "I believe that my feelings are more of a scared type of feelings, mainly because I feel uncomfortable around this population ...," while another expressed a similar feeling by saying, "I am a little nervous about the actual 'homeless count' just because it's out of my comfort zone..."

Perhaps related to this cause of anxiety, several students expressed apprehension about their own skills and how they would deal with the data collection process. One student noted,

"I am really nervous about the survey. I feel that I am awkward a lot of times when I talk. I do not want to come off rude or mean to the people we are surveying," while another recorded: "I am nervous about doing the count because I don't know how I would react to answering questions of a personal nature during a time of stress like that. I don't want to further stigmatize or hurt anyone" Finally, students also expressed anxiety about different steps in the research process, such as working with software and analysis techniques.

While students expressed quite a bit of anxiety, particularly early in the project, most also expressed excitement and anticipation. Some examples of this expressed feeling include: "I look forward to this experience. I think this project will be a challenge, because it is something I have never done before"; "I think this project will [give me] a new found excitement for research in our profession. [It will] give us a first-hand experience for conducting research in the future"; and, "Our learning is going to help a real organization and that's pretty cool, too. I am excited about the contribution I will make to this year's count."

Also early in the semester, students struggled with their own thoughts about homelessness and their community. For example, one student stated that after a recent experience with one homeless man, she was "really saddened and disappointed with myself for feeling so impatient" and thought that she would not choose this area of social work for her professional practice. However, at the same time, "I want a better attitude It will be good for me to be involved in this project so I can work on seeing the other side of the coin."

Another student also recognized her own misperceptions about the homeless noting: "I recognize that I do have stereotypes about the homeless because even when the representatives were speaking, a few of my stereotypes were broken. For example, I never thought of homelessness as affecting whole families, but instead assumed that it mainly affected individuals"

Students dealt with their own perceptions of the homeless as well as those in society. Once the data collection day was over, students commented on their interactions with the individuals they encountered: "The homeless people I did speak with were very nice and interested in talking to me. ... I was a little surprised that I did not encounter as many mental disabilities as I

expected. The individuals I spoke with were quite coherent and well spoken.”

After interviewing a man living behind the public library, another student said, “He was so easy to talk to. It seemed to me that he just wanted someone to listen to his story. It is hard to grow up in this society and not have a negative view of homeless people. They are seen as lazy, dirty, drunks, and many other horrible things, but those are not true ... I think that one thing that I learned is that it could happen to anyone. It was an eye opener.”

As the experience progressed, evidence of new feelings emerged from the students’ comments. Students began to express some disappointment with the reality of the research experience, particularly with the data collection phase. For example, “My experience at the [homeless count] was not what I had expected. I imagined that there would have been much more people there and that we would have received more surveys that we did. I did not take any surveys because the individuals refused. I did not understand why they would not take the survey because it was made clear that this would benefit them in the future.”

As the students gained more experience with the research project, some began to express some confidence about their newly gained knowledge and abilities. For example one student, who had expressed concern with her interviewing skills, saw that she did better than she expected at the count: “Basically, I got comfortable with how I spoke to people – being respectful and natural. I was not as nervous as I expected.” Regarding the data entry phase, a student says, “Working with the SPSS files has been much easier than I had feared. Setting up the variables, though tedious, it not all that difficult. Data entry was easy as well once you get the coding down.”

Another student expresses a similar feeling about analysis: “Working with data was difficult at first because I was not exactly sure what I was doing. After [the instructor] helped us and walked through everything it made it much easier and understandable. The SPSS software is very intriguing. I did not realize how much the program could do. ... I understand everything we have done so far.”

One student went so far as to say, “I helped a few of my class mates ... I feel really comfortable

about all the things that we have done so far. This class has not been as hard as I thought it would be so far!”

In the end, a couple of students commented on their satisfaction with the end result. One said: “I think that our overall presentation went well. The final PowerPoint and report ... made a great resource for those that attended. ... I think that our group did really well in organizing our information. A lot of our information was over services and kind of blended together. We were able to organize it into common areas of interest in order for someone looking at the information to not feel so overwhelmed. After working with our information, our group felt very confident in what we were presenting.”

Learning and Engagement. The second overarching theme emerging from the online journals was learning and engagement with the research project. Students were asked to reflect on each stage of the research process. Since the planning had been conducted by the community partner, students began their experience with the data collection phase. They demonstrated their engagement with the material by commenting on various problems. For example, one student applied material from the text concerning errors in reasoning to her experience during the data collection: “One of the errors was overgeneralization. I think that this research will help us to see that each person was different. Talking to the few men that I did showed me that they were homeless for different reasons.”

Another reflected on how the data collection should have been done differently, again applying some information from the course text. She thought that “a lot more of the homeless people would have been willing to take the survey had they been able to take it themselves. ... This seems to apply to what the book talks about in ‘direct measure’. As a form of gathering information, you are observing behaviors while giving the survey, but at the same time you are being intrusive ... and therefore changing the behavior of the person you are interviewing.”

Another student recognized this same problem as an ethical issue: “Although the survey was ‘anonymous,’ the person administering the survey is looking you right in the face while you answer such questions. That is not anonymous in my book.” Another observed a communication

issue noting that “there were not any translators at the Outreach Center to even question Spanish speaking individuals without seeming like extreme ‘outsiders.’”

Students also reported numerous issues with the survey itself. One student commented, “I think that the survey could use some improvement. It did not seem to proceed logically and sometimes questions seemed to repeat” Students continued to struggle with this issue about the quality of the survey instrument throughout the semester.

During the data entry phase, students continued to identify problems with the survey and the data collection, noting how difficulties arose in translating the surveys into a database and how some surveys were incorrectly completed. However, through their comments, we can also see beginning-level mastery of the process. For example, one student comments: “Setting up an SPSS file has been seemingly easy. I admit I was confused on the first day that we set up our file, but after working with the data and using the program more frequently, I better understand the dynamics of the program. Initially, our group had trouble developing codes for the survey and determining the type of coding system that would be used for each particular question. The data entry was relatively easy, except for questions that gave the respondent ... a variety of answers to choose from.”

Another student highlighted this same difficulty, working with real world data, as well as the necessity of the step of data cleaning: “I thought it was a good plan to have the students double check the data entry. From inputting the first surveys to the last, problems were discovered and resolved. By double checking the data once it was set, the class made sure the results were uniform and accurate.”

Students continued to reveal their developing mastery (as well as their perception of such) in the data analysis phase. One student commented that after spending some time looking at the handouts and types of graphs the students learned to analyze with the program, “it became a little bit easier.” Another student thought that “once you run the analysis process a couple times it’s easier to get the hang of.” Another went so far as to express some delight about the experience stating, “I think I have learned more with the diagrams,

charts, and lectures as an aide to my learning. The SPSS is very cool. I am impressed with the capabilities of this program.”

Another reflected about understanding a statistical technique but also some frustration with this particular project: “It was really hard to see real correlations in the data with such a small sample. There were not many tests that were run that came out as being statistically significant. The t-test was easy to run after you saw how it worked.”

Not surprisingly, students, like practitioners, feel that “significant” tests are more important or more interesting than those that are not. This concern was reflected in several other students’ entries.

Chat Session

At the end of the semester, students participated in the online chat session. Two main themes appeared to emerge from this data including the service-learning experience and limitations in the research endeavor.

The service-learning experience. The main purpose of the chat session was to gather students’ ideas about the service-learning component. Students’ comments were overwhelmingly positive about working with the community partner. Students found the experience to be enjoyable, a worthwhile endeavor, and helpful in their learning process. Three student entries illustrated this idea: “I liked that we did actual research and helped an agency. It was more real life”; “I think it helped to make the information real and applicable, instead of just reading about it”; and, “I think that it was great that we were actually able to apply the information we were learning in class. ... It helped us learn the concepts better, or at least better able to apply them.” Additionally, students responded that if they were the instructor, they would use service-learning again, while fine-tuning the process.

A couple of comments pointed the instructor toward some possible improvements. One student suggested that there should have been more contact with the community partner and another that she did not enjoy the computer lab work (data entry and analysis).

Students also reflected on issues with the community partner. Of particular concern was the fact that the community partner provided

very limited training on the data collection (true for both students and community volunteers). While the instructor brought members of the partner agency into the classroom to provide this training, the results were inadequate as evidenced by students' comments regarding the count. The issue with the community partner is related to the second theme emerging from the chat session.

Limitations of the research endeavor. While not the intention, a good proportion of the comments during the chat session were about the challenges that the group faced in conducting the research. Even at the end of the semester, after completion of the service-learning component, students appeared to continue to struggle with the limitations they encountered during the research project.

One of the biggest limitations encountered was the small sample size. With only 25 completed surveys, many of the students felt frustrated. One student noted, "I think that we all wanted to help out as best as we could, but we expected more people to be involved (respondents) than we actually had." Another student furthered this idea with, "I guess the low count made the whole project seem a little bit meaningless, like everything we were working on didn't represent the population very well since our sample was so small." During this part of the session, students continued to engage with the material, discussing ideas to increase the sample.

Despite their frustration, some students commented that this was also part of the learning experience: "I learned that research doesn't always go the way you plan for it to"; "This was interesting – social work research takes many forms. It was important for us to learn how to work with a small sample"; "It showed us how research is not perfect and we really had to deal with the problems and be flexible with the situation so we could get things done."

Community Partner

As a final note, the community partner appeared to be satisfied with the results of the service-learning project. While a formal evaluation was not conducted with the group, members told the first author informally that the presentation and project report would be a benefit to them in their endeavors regarding the homeless. Also, they said that the information was presented in a

format that was different and more useful than in past years.

Discussion

Overall, the evaluation results appear to be positive. Students saw a great deal of value in participating in such a project as it effectively bridged the gap between classroom learning and "real world" application, linking research with practice as suggested by Dunlap (1993). Students enjoyed the experience, thought it was useful to their professional careers, and believed that it bolstered their learning. The quantitative data indicated that their attitudes toward research did improve over the course of the semester. Despite the differences in content presentation and the frustrations of working with real-world data, students finished the semester with positive attitudes toward research, as well as confidence in their ability to conduct research. Students applied concepts and skills they learned in class to the service-learning experience. Additionally, the students demonstrated a great deal of engagement with the material. Beyond assignments, they continued to express concerns about and debate options regarding the project.

While we were pleased to see that the students enjoyed the experience, it was also crucial that students began to see the usefulness of research and its place as a part of their professional lives. This evidence of engagement and movement toward comfort and self-efficacy as researchers seems particularly important as it may increase the likelihood that these students will participate in research efforts as professionals. Finally, though not related to research per se, data from the student journals suggest that the students struggled with their own feelings about the homeless and many, through this project, developed a greater understanding of the situations and circumstances leading to homelessness. These results lend support for King's (2003) suggestion that service-learning can be a vehicle for teaching social work values and ethics.

Limitations

Serious research limitations in this study include the small sample size, the effects of social desirability, measurement, and the lack of a control/comparison group. With such a small number of students involved, our ability to

generalize as well as the power of analysis were limited. With such a small group of students who are very familiar with their peers and with the instructor, social desirability is certainly a concern. Students may have responded in ways that they felt reflected well on themselves, their instructor, or their peers, rather than expressing their true feelings about the project. In addition, one of the quantitative measurement instruments was significantly modified from the literature and therefore did not have established reliability and validity.

Challenges

Incorporating service-learning into this social work research course was a challenge for the instructor. The biggest obstacle encountered was limited class periods (time) with the students. Whenever we worked on the service-learning project, it never failed that we did not have enough time to complete the tasks set for the day. Just when the students started to figure out what to do, the 50-minute period was at an end. If repeated, the course would be restructured to address this issue by reducing frequency but increasing duration of class meetings. Also, adding service-learning resulted in a heavier workload for the instructor; but, as others have pointed out, it was worth it (Lemieux & Allen, 2007).

Another challenge for the instructor was working with imperfect data. Like the students, she felt some frustration with the training provided by the community partner, the survey construction, and resulting problems with data entry and analysis. However, this can also be a useful experience for students. In truth, research projects rarely go very smoothly and researchers must come to terms with this issue, particularly when working with a community agency.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of working with real-world data, the limitation of this evaluation, and the difficulties of designing this type of experience for students, the results of our effort were positive. This evaluation contributes to the growing body of evidence that service-learning experiences in research courses enhance student learning, while improving connections between theory and practice. As Knee (2002) notes of her course, our involvement in the homeless count

seemed to “make research less intimidating and more interesting, while making [research] more applicable to the real world” (p. 213). Through the project, students had a chance to conduct real research and contribute to a local agency. The data appear to show that this fact was meaningful to students and that they enjoyed the experience. These findings coincide with other instructors’ experiences with community projects in research courses for social work students. We would also agree with Kapp (2006) that service-learning “is an effective method for teaching research to undergraduate social work students” (p. 68). Additionally, this evaluation suggests that service-learning experiences do provide real-world applications of the social work profession’s mission and value base, a point emphasized in the literature (King, 2003; Williams, King, & Koob, 2002; Phillips, 2007). While the previous relationship between social work and service-learning may have been weak (Phillips, 2007), it seems increasingly obvious that this pedagogy has an important place in social work education. Service-learning also offers a way to usefully engage with the community, increasingly a goal of higher education.

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