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Integrating Service, Community, and Teaching: Inspiring Students While Building a Mentoring Program for African American Youth

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Abstract. This teaching note describes how the author used various social work practice skills to design and effectively implement a community-based local mentoring program for African American adolescents. This program served as a case study for social work students who practice in rural areas to learn about community development since our program lacks formal rural community practice training module in its curriculum. This article details the process and provides practical examples and recommendations for social work faculty on how to infuse community service experience into the classroom.

Keywords: Teaching, mentoring, African American youth

Social work education can support the academic development of students who work and live in rural communities by providing models of effective, experiential community development programs. This essay outlines how the development of a mentoring program for African American youth in a rural state has enhanced both instructor development and graduate student learning outcomes. This is of particular importance since I teach in a school of social work in a rural state that does not have a specific rural component in our curriculum. This essay reviews my experiences in integrating various social work practice skills within the community, and how those skills were translated into the classroom.

Like many tenure-track faculty, I was encouraged to incorporate service into my scholarship when I arrived at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. I decided that I wanted my service to align with my research which focuses on African American identity development, particularly among youth. To that end, I joined the 100 Black Men of Greater Little Rock, Inc. (100 BMOGLR) as a member the following year. The 100 BMOGLR is a national non-profit service organization based on the four tenets of Mentoring, Education, Economic Development, and Health and Wellness programming, and the Greater Little Rock chapter of the organization is one of 118 chapters worldwide. Upon joining, I was honored to be a part of the group and looked forward to contributing in any way I could as a social worker and educator. Membership requirements are a minimum of two hours of service per month, and my intention upon joining was to simply participate as a way to get involved in the community.

The 100 BMOGLR lives by two mottos: *Real Men Giving Real Time*; and *Who They See is Who They'll Be*. Our chapter had a good, established record in the community of being a group of caring men. However, member turnover and attrition began to affect the chapter after some organizational turmoil. We went through a two-year period where the chapter struggled to provide effective programming. We had become stale and stagnant, and our reputation declined. Years of un-impactful programming had led to this, and we found ourselves on the precipice of collapse.

At that time I faced a personal, professional, and ethical dilemma. Should I join the effort of improving a fledgling non-profit by offering my social work background and experience?

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Could I personally dedicate the time and effort required to take on the mantle of leadership to try to turn the organization around? Or should I abandon ship and focus on the number one priority of all junior faculty, upping my research productivity so that I could secure tenure and promotion (Gose, 2011)? After much contemplation, I decided to run for president of the 100 BMOGLR and was elected later that year. We needed climate change both within our organization and within the city, and that was the first order of business in my new leadership role. If our community non-profit was going to survive, I had to model to our members our motto *Who They See is Who They'll Be* by providing effective leadership and direction. To accomplish this goal, I had to assume the many roles of a micro- and macro-level social worker: advocate, broker, community-change agent, counselor, mediator, and researcher. I found that assuming these roles and using their accompanying practice skills, significantly improved my teaching skills and learning outcomes related to macro and micro social work.

Roles Used in the Community

Researcher

Often, when we think of mentoring programs for African American youth, we tend to think of large urban centers. Although many African American youth do live in urban centers, a significant number of youth are from cities in rural states such as Knoxville, Tennessee, Charleston, South Carolina, and the place where I currently reside, Little Rock, Arkansas. One classic saying among Little Rock locals is that, "it only takes a ten minute drive in any direction to have you in a rural area outside of the city." In Pulaski County, and the entire Central Arkansas area, where Little Rock resides, many families that have moved into the area are from more rural areas of the state. Many of the students I teach and young people I mentor are from small towns with charming names such as "Rose City," "Sweet Home," and "Roland." And all are within a fifteen minute drive of Little Rock's city center. In a recent review of the student enrollment of the MSW program in which I teach, approximately 60% of admitted students the past two years live in rural areas of the state outside of the Greater Little Rock area. I have spent the majority of my life in southern rural states, and what I've observed is that issues of school delinquency, low expectations, and risky, sometimes criminal, behavior in which many African American youth participate is not exclusive to more traditional urban centers such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York City, and Dallas (O'Donnell, Richards, Pearce, & Romero, 2010). Arguably, children raised in rural areas are at an increased risk for delinquency due to the lack of community resources and afterschool programs (Taylor, Merritt, & Austin, 2013).

African American teenagers face many obstacles (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). Aronson & Steele (2005) point to the achievement gaps between African American males and their racial and ethnic counterparts. In Arkansas specifically, 40 percent of African American males do not graduate from high school (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012). In addition, African American high school students in Little Rock experience the inappropriate use of school-based arrests as a disciplinary tool (Kennedy, 2014). Many African American students are funneled out of the public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Zero tolerance policies with regard to school discipline have significantly increased the number of arrests made at school. Pulaski County, where Little Rock is located, has the highest arrest rate, 44 per 1000 students, and the majority of those arrested are African

American. African American students comprise only 21 percent of the K through 12 student population in Arkansas, but 57 percent of recorded school arrests (Kennedy, 2014).

100 BMOGLR concluded that there were a sufficient number of programs within the city to target the top African American high school students; therefore, we specifically sought teenagers irrespective of grade point average to participate in the program to underscore that we believed all youth are worthy of good role models and quality mentoring relationships.

Program Developer

In the spring of 2012, I led the charge for us to design a mentoring program to mentor African American teen boys specifically between the ages of 13-17. We designed a program called the 100 Academy Mentoring Program (100 Academy). The 100 Academy is an eight week mentoring program that led participants through the Success, Motivation, Academics, Respect, and Trust (SMART) model. SMART was designed to provide various mentored life lessons to program participants. Youth who enrolled in the 100Academy met with 100 BMOGLR members in a group setting for 90 minutes every Saturday for eight weeks. During each mentoring session, mentees were taught the principles of the SMART program by various chapter members who were trained in the SMART program guidelines.

Counselor and Group Leader

To “graduate,” participants must have attended 80 percent of the sessions and actively participate in Academy activities such as essay writing, group discussion, and community service projects. During Academy sessions I primarily play the role of group leader. During the eight week program, each 90 minute session was designed to teach the young men the benefits of effectively building relationships and working together toward a common goal. From an educator and clinician viewpoint, helping the young men excel in a quasi-educational environment is of specific emphasis due to challenges that many African American youth face while in school. As Williams, Greenleaf, Albert, and Barnes (2014) posit in their exploration of the role of counselors in the lives of African American at-risk students, it is imperative that structural support mechanisms (e.g., family, school, and community) are developed and enhanced whenever possible for disadvantaged students to excel in school despite of the adverse situations that many face. Providing a safe space for the young men has taken additional significance given the recent rise in self-harm, high-risk behavior, and depression among African American adolescents (Compton, Thompson, Kaslow 2005). Matlin, Molock, & Tebes (2011) investigated the role of connectedness and social support, specifically peer support, in suicidality and depression among African American adolescents. In their study of over 200 African American adolescents, they discovered that increased family support and peer support are associated with decreased suicidality. They concluded that peer support and community connectedness played a key moderating role in the relationship between depressive symptoms and suicidality (Matlin, Molock, & Tebes, 2011). In short, they found that programs which use group activities such as the Saturday morning 100 Academy sessions have the potential to help reduce depression among African American adolescents.

Subsequently, I use many of the same group development and cohesion strategies while leading the 100 Academy sessions as I do while teaching my Advanced Group Psychotherapy

graduate course. The same group dynamics of the classic forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning that occur in therapeutic group work also happen among the young and older men who participate in group sessions (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). While facilitating the groups, I use the skills of effective group leadership. All of the tools that I teach my students to use while effectively leading groups are put into practice; everything from encouraging the group to become comfortable with everyone for their own benefit to empowering group members to effectively deal with *problematic* group behaviors such as the classic “Help Rejecting Complainer,” to effectively using silence to allow the young men time to process their thoughts, attitudes, and emotions that come to the surface during the program (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2008). Several of the young men are quite hesitant to participate at the beginning of the program. When asked about their hesitancy, several 100 Academy participants readily admitted that the only reason they were participating was because their parent or guardian insisted that they needed mentoring. With this in mind, it was necessary to, and quite helpful that I could, work in multiple roles of educator, practitioner, and community organizer during our time together.

Community Organizer and Educator

At the conclusion of the program, we were encouraged that the initiative went relatively well, but we wanted to increase our impact by recruiting more young people to participate in the 2013 class. Therefore we: (a) increased our social media presence; (b) promoted the activities and accomplishments of 2012 participants; (c) visited schools and community service events to increase our service imprint; and (d) volunteered at various community events. As mentioned, the chapter’s *100 Black Men* brand had name recognition in the city, but people did not really know us or our program. Our goal was to change that popular perception through active community engagement and media appearances to promote the upcoming class. I realized early that my role had expanded from a community member who took on a leadership role in the community civic group, to that of an experienced social work professional who was changing culture through community non-profit organization leadership.

I often implore my students to believe that the best social work practice isn’t either *micro* or *macro*, as they so often believe in this false choice dichotomy, but a combined effort of all of the skills that we strategically plan to give them during their time in our undergraduate and graduate level programs. According to Dreuth and Dreuth-Fewell (2003), students and practitioners should be exposed to more real world examples of community-based training. My experiences in the community were a good grounding in real world examples that I could share in my classroom. Specifically, the experiences I shared with my students and colleagues underscore the importance of understanding organizational functioning and the ability to deal with associated challenges. At every turn, including my role as a professor, I was using social work practice skills to facilitate change.

Program Evaluator

With regard to the 100 Academy, 90 percent (45 of 50) of the young men who participated in the program have graduated since 2012: 4 of 6 (66%) in 2012, 18 of 18 (100%) in 2013, and 23 of 26 (88%) in 2014. The average age of participants is 15, and of those who have matriculated through high school, one mentee has enrolled in college, one mentee earned his

GED, and the remaining young men are still enrolled in high school and matriculating to their next grade. Due to the program's popularity and exposure, we expect a full class of 30 young men to apply to be participants for the program this fall. As a part of our ongoing program evaluation, for the past two years we've asked parents and guardians to complete a brief electronic satisfaction survey of the impact of the program on their sons. Thirty nine percent (14 of 36) of the parents or guardians completed the survey which was a combination of five questions that gathered parental views of the program's operation and success. Parents and guardians were asked about their perception of how the program was implemented, and its mentoring on their sons. We also gave the parents room to provide any recommendations they had for improving the program. Respondents have been overwhelmingly positive, and the following are common response themes:

- The program filled a void in the lives of their son that was much needed;
- Many 100 academy mentees did not like attending weekly program sessions at the beginning but grew to look forward to attending towards the end of the eight week period; and
- Small improvements were beginning to show up in the academic success of the mentees.

In addition to the satisfaction survey, we also charted the general interest and growth of the program as a part of our overall program evaluation. In addition to the support and interest of parents who wanted their sons to participate, sponsorships and donations to the 100 BMOGLR have grown by 400 percent since the initial launch of the program in the fall of 2012. As mentioned, sponsor support has been enough to not just support the 100 Academy Mentoring Program, but it has also spawned a series of annual *Mentoring Across a Lifetime* leadership conferences that the organization has hosted the past two springs. Lastly, the general interest and support of the organization has grown significantly via word of mouth of community members. In all, we view the program as successful with more room for future growth.

From Community to Classroom

Each year I receive a new group of first year social work graduate students, and upon day one of the program, the majority already know if they will be a micro specialist focused on therapeutic work with clients, or a macro professional who will lead, and ultimately own, their own social service enterprise someday. In my social work practice course that I teach in two parts, one each semester of the foundational year of our graduate program, I have annually given my students the same mantra that "the best social workers do both, so don't limit yourselves." Despite my best efforts, the students seem to philosophically understand my point, but they also observed that the majority of my in-class examples came directly from the clinical perspectives that drew upon my experience as a social worker in a behavioral health center where I had worked as a therapist several years ago. Each year I would give my speech but not necessarily personally see any movement in the students' reaction to my charge. That began to change, however, once I began to share more of the lessons I've learned during my experience leading the 100 BMOGLR in the various roles that have previously been described. Here are three tangible ways that my classroom experience has changed since I began sharing more of my community work with students.

Classroom Activities: Better Real World Role Play

I use role plays in each of my classes. Through the experiences I've had in my various roles with the 100 BMOGLR, I was able to craft better-designed scenarios that stretched the learning experience of my students. For example, in my Practice I class I have students conduct role plays with each other to improve their basic social work interviewing skills. One of the role plays involves a 15-year old African American male, 'Joey,' who presents many of the same attributes that some of the young men of the 100 Academy program present: being uncomfortable with sharing in a therapeutic setting, lack of trust of authority figures, and the need for peer support. My community experience enhances the learning environment via my ability to help provide a more nuanced approach to both the design of the role play as well as the classroom discussion I facilitate following each.

Course Content: Reshaping My Own Expertise

My work with the 100 Academy taught me two lessons that I quickly realized and then infused into the course content of each class I teach, particularly my Diversity and Oppression and Juvenile Delinquency courses. The first lesson was that I'm not as young, hip, and culturally competent as I assumed. The second lesson was that some of the same anxieties experienced by adolescents entering the 100 Academy were very similar to the anxieties of many of my students. With regard to lesson one of cultural competence, without my experience of working with 21st century millennial adolescents, I may not have ever realized the extent to which my worldview lens was that of a late 20th century child and adolescent of the 90s. The realities, challenges, and obstacles faced by the population I was serving in the community were beyond the boundaries of my life and content expertise. I assumed that my scholarship on conditions that affected the lives of African American adolescents made me an expert on said population. The lessons I learned over the course of three 100 Academy program classes has made me more aware of my own blind spots and presumed/over-assumed ownership of relevant cultural competence. Now, when I teach the two aforementioned courses, I give the story I just described to my class as a case study on the number one rule of cultural competence in my opinion: the moment that you *think* you know everything there is to know about a group and stop learning, you are no longer culturally competent.

With regard to the second lesson, having a better understanding of the impact of anxieties associated with a new group environment, the community experience I had with the young men I mentor has given me more understanding and patience with anxious students who also struggle with this issue. Many have written about the very real experiences of collegiate student anxieties and their influence on student learning (Jiao & Onwuegbuzie, 1998; Green, Bretzin, Leininger, & Stauffer, 2001). Although I was aware of those challenges, it wasn't until I re-launched myself back into community work with the 100 Academy program in 2012 that I saw the parallel in the actions and thought processes of the adolescents I worked with and some of the graduate students I taught. Many program members are *nontraditional* students in the sense that many are later returning to school, decades later in some instances, seeking their post undergraduate graduation. It's hard to explain exactly why this happened, but I have become much more patient and understanding of student needs since my experience with the youth. I still challenge them and teach as well as I can, but now I also take the same effort to be tuned into the pulse of the students of my classes and check in much more often to see how they are doing inside and

outside of the classroom. This is no different than the typical check-in process that I would do with the young men when I put my clinical cap on always made sure to follow the basic principle of being tuned into the pulse of the group prior to each session (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; Leszcz & Yalom, 2005).

Course Content: Teaching

With regard to teaching students who are from rural areas and will most likely ultimately practice in rural areas, I believe that my service experiences have helped those students by giving them a detailed account of how we can use various social work roles to lead quality interventions in various settings. Social work students should be prepared to be independent practitioners and skilled in relating to various socioeconomic classes and ethnic groups. They also appear to benefit from a combined generalist educational and rural field instruction experience (Helton, 2010). In short, the integration of what they get in their field experiences are undergirded with in-depth exploration of various aspects of issues within the classroom setting. I hope that my students have received valuable insight from the lessons I've shared with them during classroom instruction. Particularly, I hope they recognize that through the use of social work skills that have been shown to be particularly effective in rural communities—such as living and working in the same community where you practice, reflection of the impact of the community on the practitioner, as well developing a deeper understanding of the group you are serving—it is possible to conduct quality practice that not only is applicable to rural settings, but any setting where they eventually may practice as social workers (Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2009).

Arkansas is a rural state in which many of my students are born and raised, or currently live. We do not have a specific rural component of our curriculum but my colleagues and I find ways to weave our rural work experiences into our teaching.

One of the roles I've had the pleasure of fulfilling during my university work is that of a Field Liaison. Each semester I help a group of eight to 10 students who are placed in rural social work field sites navigate internship challenges. In each class we discuss how our course content affects their classroom and experiential learning while in the field. Research has shown that first person accounts of rural stories help students become more sensitive to needs of a community (Kropf, 2003; Lavan, 2008). Therefore, I'm confident that by modeling various roles used in program development I helped grow and lead via the 100 BMOGLR the educational experience of my students was heightened.

Learning Outcomes

So, how exactly have the learning outcomes of my students been effected by the work I have done with the 100 BMOGLR, specifically the 100 Academy program? In short, my experiences have, at minimum, inspired a few more students. There haven't been significant changes in the number of students who take, pass, and move on to graduate from our program. There has been a qualitative shift, however, in the depth of discussions held in each class. This depth has been exhibited in students providing more in-depth responses on exam questions as well as demonstrating a willingness to take more nuanced perspectives when writing community assessments and other written assignments. This has led to a more relaxed classroom setting, one where the students receive the necessary rigorous education to earn their graduate degree while

also learning the importance of having flexibility in their approach to what constitutes effective social work practice. Oftentimes we don't fully express the value of trial and error learning as a professional. By having shared both the ups (e.g., the success of the mentoring program) and downs (e.g., the struggle to get more community members and parents involved) of my experience I think that value has been added to the learning experience of my students.

By being able to share the experiences of working with my mentoring organization, I have been able to provide students with real world examples of community social work practice and I have also been able to provide students with the opportunity to gain their own experiential learning experiences by participating in some of 100 BMOGLR's community events. Specifically, eight graduate and two undergraduate students from my social work program attended the 2014 Mentoring Across a Lifetime conference and the number who have registered to attend the 2015 conference has more than doubled. The feedback I received from their experience was very positive and many of the students shared that not only did they enjoy seeing social work community advocacy in action, they also were now inspired to "give back" via mentoring in the future. One of the sayings that we often give voice to in social work is "going where the client is." By being able to see community members come together as a participatory learning experience, I strongly believe that my students who attended the event will use their experience to better relate to their future clients and other community members who they may work with in the future.

Final Thoughts: Chasing the Learning

Leading the 100 BMOGLR has afforded me a wealth of experiences to share weekly with my students. One mantra that I have given all of my students and advisees over the past decade has been to "Chase the Learning, Not the Grade." I am proud to report to all who have heard my message that I have taken my own advice on this life course. The learning that I've received, and continue to receive daily, throughout this process of focusing my university service work on the greater community at large is worth more to me than any letter grade in any class. I encourage all of my fellow social work practitioners and educators to expand how we reach outside our comfort zone to practice and educate by actively applying the skills we teach our students in our local communities. This is of particular importance in rural settings where our unique ability to work closely with our clients has prepared us to be more cognizant of the issues that our community populations face. When one does this, not only will one enrich one's community, one will also enrich one's teaching and the classroom experience of students by having more to give them with regard to pertinent, current, real world issues (Skilton, 2011).

"Communicating the goal of social justice as part of both the social work code of ethics and the profession's person-in-environment perspective has been a challenge for social work educators in the classroom" (Rocha, 2000, p. 53). One of the best ways to enhance our ability to do this as educators is to take the student outside of the classroom to actually examine and feel for themselves the benefit of effective social work practice to individuals, groups, and communities (Goldstein, 2001).

This past December, during the graduation of the 3rd 100 Academy class of mentees, included in the crowd were several of my current and former students. I didn't reach out to them to solicit their attendance, and no extra credit or any course incentive was offered. They reached

out to other members of my organization because after hearing my stories about the program, and the young men who matriculated through it, they wanted to attend the ceremony to see for themselves the impact the program has had on the young men, their families, and the greater community. After the formal part of the graduation was over, two of my students approached me to thank me for showing them a different side of social work that they hadn't seen put into practice before.

I'll close by sharing a quote from the American author, William Arthur Ward, "*The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires*" (William Arthur Ward Quotes, n.d.). This quote represents the lofty goal that many junior faculty, myself included, embrace as we enter the world of higher education. That said, the realities of balancing teaching, research, and service, in the pursuit of tenure sometimes makes it difficult to bring that same drive to the classroom after a couple of years in the academy, and the desire to inspire may be replaced with the desire to just survive. My hope in having penned this manuscript is that social work instructors feel compelled to take chances and fully thrust themselves into their roles of teachers, researchers, and community servants and then bring all of the valuable lessons from that experience with them back into the classroom to teach students. What I've found most rewarding in my experience is that, contrary to popular belief, excelling in one of the three areas doesn't take away from the others, it actually enhances them.

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