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Research exercise: Learning as a Way of Leading

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Learning as a Way of Leading

A Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort Community Project

2012 Service Learning Experience

Abstract

The Building Communities through Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort (BCSJLLC) strives to help students understand the importance of social justice and its impact on communities while providing students with opportunities to grow as leaders. The cohort integrates the Marianist ideals of "learn, lead, and serve" with service learning opportunities. In the BCSJLLC, we learned about theories of justice and social philosophies by specified classes together in Composition, Philosophy, and Religion. Members then coalesced around the LLC's mission of literacy by participating in the Cleveland Elementary Book Buddy Project where each member provided a new book for a student in grades 4-5 and shared our own personal literacy story. Shortly after, all BCSJLLC members were trained by Project READ to tutor students in K-8 and young adults. Project READ then placed us in tutoring positions from Holy Angels, an elementary school, to Dayton Early College Academy, a college preparatory high school where we assisted students with their reading skills. The cohort experience provided a perfect blend of classroom and community service while employing the Marianist model of "learn, lead, and serve." Through our service learning experience and being part of the BCSJLLC, we have gained a greater understanding of the Marianist values and why service learning is strong component to building a just society.

Building Communities for Social Justice LLC Mission Statement

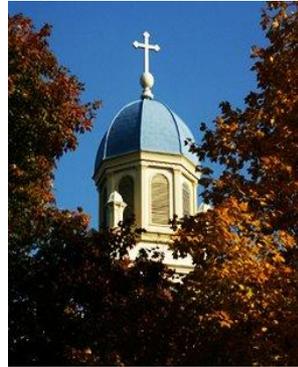
We are a living learning community that: engages in a process of intellectual inquiry, productively negotiates and creates space for critical listening and the free exchange of ideas, holistically integrates academic, residential, and co-curricular experiences, deploys the particular methodologies of the Humanities disciplines, specifically those associated with the study of English, Philosophy, and Religion fosters an interdisciplinary approach to fundamental human concerns, e.g., what it means to be human focuses on apprehending and addressing issues of Social Justice, such as stewardship, solidarity with those different from us, commitment to the integrity and equality of all human life, and dedication to the common good, encourages undergraduate research that is informed by the experience of service learning.

Dayton Early College Academy Mission Statement:

The Dayton Early College Academy is singularly focused on preparing urban learners from the Dayton Public School District to go to college and be the first in their families to graduate.

Holy Angels Mission Statement:

We are a vibrant education ministry of the Parish committed to challenging our students to grow in faith and excel in academics within a caring Christian environment.



The Cave

The Allegory of the Cave, also known as *The Cave*, can be found in Book VII of Plato's best known work, *The Republic*. Plato wrote *The Cave* in order to explain his Theory of Forms and its impact on humankind. Plato describes those unaware of the Theory of Forms as prisoners chained in a cave, unable to move their head and only able to see shadows cast on the wall by a fire and puppets. These prisoners mistake the shadows as reality because they are the only image the prisoners have ever been exposed to. When the prisoners leave the cave, they are able to turn their heads and see the real objects that cast the shadows. Plato aims to show the prisoners that we as humans acquire beliefs by our perceptual experience of physical objects. Therefore one person may have a different belief because they had different life experiences.

The Cave relates to our tutoring experiences because it can be made into an educational and social allegory. Tutoring the young students at Holy Angels and the Dayton Early College Academy can be seen as the prisoners being released from the cave. Throughout the semester, tutors and students were expected to step outside their usual routines and reality to work together and strengthen the Dayton community. As tutors, we exposed the students to the importance of an education and the students exposed us to life outside of the University of Dayton bubble; we learned from the students and the students learned from us.

A Theory of Social Justice

John Rawls is considered one of the most distinguished moral philosophers of the 20th century due to his book, *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. Rawls is known for his belief in a system of justice based on fairness rather than utilitarianism. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls develops two basic ideas. The first is original position, meaning each person must have Primary Goods such as freedom, equality, opportunity, wealth, powers, and income. The second is the veil of ignorance, meaning that members of society make their decisions about the Primary Goods without knowing where they would fall in terms of societal rank. Societal rank could be influenced by sex, race, birth, or talent. With these two ideas, Rawls believed that individual rights would never again be sacrificed for the greater good of society.

A Theory of Justice strongly influenced the drive to create the Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort and its mission. The need for Rawls' work states that we still face looming social justice conflicts in the United States and Dayton, Ohio. As tutors, we aimed to use our literacy training to give students more opportunity to succeed. Teaching students about the importance of education while improving their literacy skills will create more opportunity in their futures, a Primary Good as stated by Rawls. Similarly, tutors worked hard to understand the veil of ignorance. We were expected to go into the classroom each day without making presumptions in order to create a positive learning environment.

Outcomes

- Build strong relationships between students and tutors
- Encourage students to be confident in their academic ability
- Instill good homework routines
- Teach students about the importance of education
- Understand and apply the Marianist values of "learn, lead, and serve" in the surrounding community

Reflection

Working with Project READ through the Building Communities for Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort is an experience that we will never forget. Being a part of the Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort allowed us to build strong friendships with the students we tutored throughout the semester as well as the other participants in Project READ. We were able to share our knowledge with the students and the students were able to teach us more about life and ourselves. The experience was especially fulfilling because the courses that we took for the Social Justice Learning and Living Cohort allowed us to relate to the mission of Project READ.

Amanda: Dayton Early College Academy exposed me to a learning environment that I was not aware of before. Working with children who desire a higher education makes a huge difference in the student's efforts in their work. I have realized how blessed I am with the education I have received and I am glad to give them the same opportunity.

Learn

Brooke: My experience with Project Read was great. I enjoyed helping the younger students at Holy Angels and I feel they have helped me just as much as I helped them over the past semester.

Lead

Maggie: I really enjoyed tutoring at Dayton Early College Academy through Project Read. My favorite part of the experience was being able to work with students off campus because it made me feel like I was making a difference in the surrounding community.

Serve

Maggie Sternnock
Brooke Smith
Amanda Matney