



Student Experiences During a Community-based Sex Education Project

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In collaboration with community agencies, college students taught sex education classes to middle school students using the BART (Becoming A Responsible Teen) curriculum. Experiences of the college students as identified in weekly journals and a group debriefing session are reported. Implications and suggestions for improving community-based class projects are discussed.

• Background

- Community-based class projects are one important way for students in the social sciences to assimilate what they learn in the classroom with real world experiences.
- These projects represent the integration of theory and application (Kronick, 2007).
- Relative to students that do not engage in community-based class projects, students that do participate in such projects experience an increase in their:
 - ability to understand complex situations (Deiger, 2005),
 - academic achievement (Mpofu, 2005),
 - social capital (Howard, 2006),
 - moral reasoning (Lies, 2006),
 - ability to work with diverse populations (McHatton et al., 2006), and
 - sense of meaningfulness of college (Reed et al., 2005).
- Ngai (2006) reports other benefits of community-based projects: "...by developing personal autonomy through real world experiences, students develop a recognition of and faith in their potential. It enhances self-assurance, assumption of new responsibilities, and achievement of individual growth. Students move toward becoming responsible citizens and agents of social change" (p. 165).
- Having students reflect on their experiences in community-based class projects is key to helping students realize the full benefit of such participation (Ethridge, 2006; Marchel, 2004; Toews & Cerny, 2005).

• Purpose

- To conduct an analysis of the students' reflections in weekly journals and during a group debriefing session of their experiences during a community-based class project.

• Method

- In collaboration with community agencies, 12 college students enrolled in *Experimental Psychology* taught sex education classes to middle school students using the BART (Becoming A Responsible Teen) curriculum.
- Prior to teaching the curriculum, the students read the literature about sex education programs.
- The college students collected and analyzed pretest and posttest data from the middle school students and wrote an APA-style paper about the project.
- The college students also kept weekly journals of their experiences and then participated in a group debriefing about the overall experience.
- Eleven of the 12 students gave consent for their journal entries and statements during the group debriefing session to be used as data (the 12th student was absent on the day during which informed consent was obtained).

• Results

- Students reported that they learned more from this experience than they had in other classes.
 - A representative comment: "Experimental psychology was one of the most beneficial courses if not the most beneficial psychology courses I took while at Capital... I feel the course was a brief picture of what to expect in graduate school... Overall, I really enjoyed my experience with the kids from Youth Advocate Services and the articles that we read."
- They expressed frustration that their research study with the middle school students did not go as smoothly as expected:
 - Attendance and classroom control were issues
 - One agency did not allow the BART session about using condoms to be taught
- Several students said that the experience helped them better define or reaffirm their commitment to their chosen career path.
- Students were candid about the parts of the experience that made them uncomfortable:
 - When the students asked them about their own sexual experiences
 - When the students asked the questions that they did not know
 - When they had to demonstrate the use of condoms using penis models – they also reported that students were much more mature during this session than they expected
- They reported that the experience helped them to appreciate and understand the literature that they read at the start of the semester.
- The students gained realistic expectations about conducting applied research.

• Conclusions

- Conducting research in an applied setting can be difficult; however some steps can be taken to facilitate cooperation:
 - Developing long term relationships with community agencies can ease some of the problems. The department hopes to focus efforts on working with one agency for a variety of classes and learning experiences for our students.
 - Providing tangible rewards for the community agencies (e.g., training for their members, resources for the center) could increase commitment.
- Weekly journals helped the students raise issues that they might not have been willing to raise in other ways such as when there were disagreements among group members.
- Weekly journals also served as a way to monitor the program for the faculty running the program.

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