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The Arts in Psychotherapy 35 (2008) 20–33

THE
ARTS^{IN}
PSYCHOTHERAPY

Service-learning and art therapy in a homeless shelter

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Abstract

This article describes a brief service-learning assignment in which graduate art therapy students at an urban university in the United States worked with children residing in a homeless shelter. The term service-learning refers to the integration of community service into a college course to help students achieve specific learning objectives. In this case, service-learning was intended to supplement an art therapy internship course through an opportunity for students to increase knowledge about homelessness. Students' learning was assessed using the criteria of two art therapy education standards: Cultural and Social Diversity, and Human Growth and Development (American Association of Art Therapy [AATA], 2007). In addition to achievement noted in these areas, the service-learning assignment unexpectedly seemed to foster achievement in a third education standard: Studio Art. This article demonstrates how even a short-term service-learning assignment can enhance art therapy education and benefit the community, when it is thoughtfully integrated into the curriculum and connected to education standards.

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Keywords: Service-learning; Art therapy; Education standards; Homelessness

Service-learning is a term that refers to assigning community service in an academic course in order to facilitate certain learning objectives of the course. In addition to academic learning, service-learning is purported to help students better understand themselves and how they interact with others, and to develop their sense of responsibility to others (Fenzel, Peyrot, Speck, & Gugerty, 2003; Howard, 2001; Rhoads, 1997). A number of service-learning programs exist around the world that combine academic study with substantive volunteer work ([International Partnership for Service-Learning & Leadership, n.d.](#)) In the case described here, a service-learning assignment was integrated into an art therapy internship course to help students increase their knowledge about homelessness, and to foster a sense of social responsibility toward people experiencing homelessness.

While it was assumed that going to a homeless shelter would be of value to students' learning, in order to make their learning explicit, the assignment was connected to two related education standards of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA)—Cultural and Social Diversity, and Human Growth and Development (AATA, 2007) (Table 1). By making these two standards learning objectives of the course, students were motivated to intentionally practice and reflect on these objectives and skills. Although this assignment was by no means the only place in the art therapy curriculum to address these standards, they were appropriate to address here because of service-learning's emphasis on personal awareness and social responsibility, as well as incorporating an understanding of the broad factors influencing health and quality of life (Gelman, Holland, Seifer, Shinnamon, & Connors, 1998). For many students, coursework and internship teach knowledge and technical skills, but fall short on helping students develop social responsibility,

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Table 1
Select education standards of the American art therapy association

Standard	Description
Cultural and social diversity	Foundation of knowledge in cultural diversity theory and competency models applied to an understanding of diversity of artistic language, symbolism, and meaning in artwork and art making across culture and within a diverse society. Investigation of the role of the art therapist in social justice, advocacy, and conflict resolution (Required Content Area). Theories of counseling and development of competencies essential for a culturally responsive therapist with regard to age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, developmental disability, education, family values, and religious and spiritual values. Cultural self-awareness through self-assessment, strategies for working with diverse communities, and critical thinking with regard to attitudes, beliefs, and competent practice (Required Related Content Area).
Human growth and development	Human psychological development across the lifespan, theories of personality development, cultural and environmental influences. Familiarity with human behavior, including developmental crises, disability, exceptional behavior, and addictive behavior.
Studio art	Maintain contact with the discipline of art making. Explore the impact of art processes and materials through ongoing participation in personal art making. Strengthen connection to the creative process, understanding of personal symbolic language, and the arts based learning allowing for the opportunity to integrate intellectual, emotional, artistic, and interpersonal knowledge.

personal awareness, or interpersonal skills necessary for work with diverse populations. Fenzel et al. (2003) studied alumni who participated in service-learning and those who did not, and found service-learning alumni were more likely to have attitudes and behaviors toward both personal responsibility, and community responsibility for improving the welfare of others (Fenzel et al., 2003).

There are three necessary criteria for academic service-learning: First, there must be service provided in the community that is both relevant and meaningful to all stakeholders. Second, the service must not only serve the community, but must also enhance student academic learning in the course. Third, “the addition of relevant and meaningful service with the community . . . must also directly and intentionally prepare students for active civic participation in a diverse democratic society” (Howard, 2001, p. 12). In service-learning, all parties determine what service is to be provided. In contrast to internships where responsibilities are predetermined and roles as professional and client are understood, in service-learning “students do things *with* others rather than *for* them” (Jacoby, 1996, pp. 7–8) . . . [and] “develop a greater sense of belonging and responsibility as members of a larger community” (Jacoby, 1996, pp. 7–8).

Homelessness

The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCA) (2006) identified two trends over the past 20–25 years which are largely responsible for the rise in homelessness in the United States: The first is a growing shortage of affordable rental housing, and the second is an increase in poverty due to eroding job opportunities and diminishing public assistance. In fact, the media’s portrayal of a growing economy, reduction in welfare roles, and lower unemployment masks the fact that incomes have been falling and jobs are less secure and offer fewer benefits. Declining salaries have put housing out of reach for many workers where, in every state more than minimum wage is required to afford a one or two bedroom apartment (NCA, 2006). The connection between impoverished workers and homelessness can be seen in homeless shelters, many of which house significant numbers of full-time workers. A survey conducted by the US Conference of Mayors in 2004 found that 17% of persons in homeless situations are employed (Children’s Defense Fund, 2005). These facts seemed to be validated by our own experiences: During our service-learning assignment, we had discussed the possibility of offering art therapy during daytime hours for the adults, but were told they weren’t available because they either went to work or were out looking for work.

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