Faculty Assessment of Student Learning: Outcomes Attributed to Service-Learning and Evidence of Changes in Faculty Attitudes About Experiential Education

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This article endeavors to answer two questions: does combining service and learning in college level courses contribute to the learning outcomes desired for the course, and what explains why faculty have moved from skepticism to affirmation concerning the answer to the first question? In the past ten years faculty in a wide variety of post-secondary institutions and virtually all disciplines have begun to integrate field study in the form of service-learning into their courses. The article argues that faculty assessment is one of the best proxy measures available to answer the question of whether learning outcomes derive from service-learning and that their positive assessment of that question can be explained contextually, empirically and experientially, using both quantitative and qualitative measures. This exploratory study reviews findings from a sample of 48 faculty from sixteen different disciplines from across the nation.

Introduction

Research is a serendipitous thing. You start out with one question and a method in mind, and often both the question and the method change. I began this research a number of years ago with an elaborate research design and have found myself fortunate to become a collaborator with Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles, and their associates in the FIPSE funded effort to operationalize the research agenda outlined in the Wingspread gathering in 1991 (Giles, Honnet, & Migliore, 1991). But an article by Jim Ostrow (1994) and a conversation with Chris Hammond (1994) shifted my attention to a more qualitative inquiry I had also begun, namely interviewing faculty who had become involved in course embedded service-learning. This led me to a more triangulated research design and a conviction that faculty assessment of the learning they perceived in their classes could be viewed as more valid and reliable than the less than ideal samples, controls and measures that seemed available in my focus on student produced data (Whitaker, 1989).

Then, I discovered a study which revealed faculty attitudes toward experiential education in the early 1980’s (Eyler, 1995). That led me back to an earlier interest in the work of Angelo and Cross (1987; 1993) on the faculty as “classroom researchers.” They, along with Joseph Katz (1986) and others, posit that faculty are quite capable of assessing what is happening in their classrooms and assessing the quality of learning that has transpired. As a result, the following article focuses upon what faculty report about the learning outcomes of course embedded service-learning and how faculty attitudes toward field based experiential education have done a significant “about face” in the past decade.

Literature Review

Student Learning

As Shumer (1991) notes, most research on experiential education through the mid-80’s consisted of studies conducted primarily as program evaluations, driven by a need to justify program existence, noting that “few efforts have been made to determine how experience outside the classroom contributes to such intellectual growth” (p. 2). That has begun to change in the 1990’s since the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), in cooperation with the Johnson Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation, convened a group of researchers and experiential educators to “set a research agenda for combining service and learning.” Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler are leading a FIPSE funded research endeavor which addresses the gaps which Shumer