Service-learning authors often note that service-learning practitioners do not share a common definition for “service-learning” (Kezar, 1998; Kraft, 1996; Stanton, 1987). Kezar writes, “In the broadest sense, service-learning is a form of active, experiential learning that utilizes service in order to ground the learning process” (p. 1). She goes on to identify four principles shared by most service-learning definitions: preparation (which involves establishing clear academic goals); participation (actuating the intended service); reflection (the process of thinking critically about the service-learning experience’s effect relative to academic content); and evaluation (which entails assessing the learning that has transpired) (pp. 1-2).

These principles represent common themes in many service-learning courses. One element often identified as central to learning in service-learning is reflection. Through reflection, the students are able to process the learning experience, to synthesize, draw connections, apply course content, and integrate what they have learned with what they have experienced in the service-learning interaction. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) argue for the “power of the ‘ah ha’ moment” (p. vii) in A Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning. The authors note critical reflection’s central role in the service-learning enterprise and report that they “became increasingly aware that important moments of insight and intellectual and personal transformation were occurring for students in service-learning courses and programs” (p. vii). Based on their interviews with 67 students, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede identified common themes in students’ service-learning reflections. These themes, or outcomes, speak to the types of benefits realized by students in service-learning classes. A body of research is beginning to develop that supports benefits obtained through this type of learning (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996; Hesser, 1995; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). McKeachie (1999) writes, “In the ninth edition of this book I said that there was little research evidence of the effectiveness of service-learning. Since then a number of studies have reported positive findings” (p. 155). McKeachie goes on to identify several articles attesting to some service-learning pedagogy benefits (see Boss, 1994; Kendrick, 1996; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Myers-Lipton 1994, 1996).

In discussing an event that led to their recognizing of a need for a practical text on the reflection process, Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) relay an account provided to them by one student who had not realized the benefits often associated with service-learning. In the student’s words, “I just didn’t get it” (Bastress, 1996, p. 22).

This study focuses on what students “get” from the service-learning experience, with a particular focus on differential outcomes reported by students. Many instructors in service-learning classes share expectations regarding the preferred learning types and expected outcomes for students based on their participation in service-learning classes. But questions remain regarding the various outcomes and the circumstances under which these outcomes are achieved. Do all students in service-learning classes “get it”? And if students in service-learning classes do not get “it” (the outcomes practitioners expect and encourage), then what do these students get from the service-learning experience? Are differences observed when one compares the reflections of higher course performers with lower course performers? Are differences observed when comparing the themes identified in reflection papers written by students in the higher and lower groups? What do students from the lower group...
reflect on in their final critical reflection assignments? Do they realize the expected outcomes, but to a lesser extent? Do they embrace some lessons, though not all? Do they instead realize benefits that the service-learning instructor neither expects nor embraces? Do these students “get” anything at all? Questions about differential outcomes relative to students’ performance in a service-learning class prompted this analysis of student outcomes.

Research Setting

These data result from a service-learning course in communication I have taught for the past five years. The course assignments have remained the same over this period and I have been the only instructor assigned to teach the class. The Communication for Youth Institute (CYI) course provides a unique service-learning experience for our undergraduates, graduate student assistants, and youth (grades 7 through 12). The primary course objective is to teach undergraduate students to teach community youth how to develop, research, outline, present, and critique public oral presentations. The course’s first part is targeted to the undergraduate students as we work out course planning, logistics, recruitment, course material preparation, and site preparation. This necessary stage of the process envisions what students might expect and encounter (the “preflective phase” that Falk, 1995, discusses), and entails the planning period when a lot of the early stage work is done. In the course’s second phase, the youth visit campus to participate in the six-week public speaking course. At this time, the youth present four oral presentations and complete two written outlines. They also receive age-appropriate lessons about public speaking. The course’s final weeks focus on reflection and assessment. Though the undergraduates engage in weekly reflections, their two major writing assignments occur in the semester’s last month. At this time, undergraduate students write a critical incident paper in which they apply academic content (communication theory) to some event that has been observed in the CYI program. Their second, major, final paper is the culminating critical reflection assignment, in which the undergraduates identify their contributions to the program, provide suggestions and solutions for problems encountered in the CYI program, and identify how previous communication coursework did or did not prepare them for their service-learning experience in CYI. Students are instructed to identify what benefits their association with the service-learning course afforded them.

I developed the CYI course with several learning objectives in mind. I wanted to provide our undergraduate majors an opportunity to apply communication principles in a real world setting. My assumption was that public speaking is a fundamental skill taught in our major. Minimally, our students should have an understanding of how to present an effective presentation. I also assumed that given the extensive practice our students acquire in doing these presentations during their time in the major, they should be able—with additional training in teaching others—to impart their knowledge to a younger population. Given that many of our undergraduates take the public speaking course at an earlier point in their education, I recognized that the CYI course would serve as a refresher for them on public speaking techniques (e.g., outlining, audience analysis, speech evaluation, etc.). I also saw the CYI course as an opportunity to give our undergraduates a different learning experience in which they could work closely with the instructor to plan, prepare, and deliver a course. In this regard, the undergraduates have the opportunity to establish a close working relationship, both with the faculty member, and with the other students enrolled in the class.

Related to this outcome is the ability to gain exposure to teaching in a very controlled situation. In this way, undergraduates gain limited exposure to teaching; many CYI participants have considered a teaching career as a result of their CYI affiliation. The program also was developed with multiple community-based outcomes in mind, including the desire to provide youth with earlier exposure to public speaking, to provide community members with an opportunity to participate in the campus community, and to extend a bridge to the youth to encourage future affiliation with our campus as potential undergraduates. These were some of the outcomes I envisioned when I designed the course.

After teaching the course for five years, I feel confident in my ability to describe the outcome types commonly achieved in the CYI course. I share Hesser’s (1995) belief that “faculty are in a position to assess the learning that has taken place when a service-learning component is included in a course” (p. 34). In fact, many service-learning instructors also find themselves cast into the ongoing role of service-learning advocate on their campuses and in their departments as they are asked, semester after semester, to document the learning that has occurred. We know implicitly that learning has taken place, and fortunately, we are at a place in our research where some of these learning outcomes have been documented (see, for example, Driscoll et al., 1998 for their section on outcomes assessment). Despite these early efforts, much
work remains, which is often confounded by research design challenges associated with assessment generally, and with assessing service-learning in particular.

Method

The investigation presented here is an attempt to systematically document the learning that I intuitively know took place in the CYI service-learning course, with special attention given to differential outcomes reported relative to students’ performance in the class. Over a three-year, five-semester period, 60 students’ final critical reflection papers were selected for analysis. All undergraduate students’ final papers from the CYI class over this period were included in the study. Papers were separated by semester, removing identifying information about the student. Each semester was assigned a Roman numeral (“I” through “V”), and each paper within each semester was assigned an Arabic numeral (“1” through, for example “10”). Student enrollment by semester (and consequently, number of papers analyzed), ranged from 10 to 14, with an average of 12 papers analyzed per semester.

Reviewing the literature revealed numerous possibilities for coding system categories. Given my interest in first documenting whether CYI students had realized objectives commonly associated with service-learning, I wanted to find a pre-existing classification of service-learning themes/outcomes, or possibly combine parts of previous classification lists to create an inclusive coding scheme. Initially, the data were coded using the variable categories presented by Driscoll et al. (1998). However, these categories did not sufficiently capture the students’ comments. Though the authors’ table of variables was useful in helping to formulate and collapse themes, it was not as useful when the students’ responses were coded into the categories. Reviewing the service-learning literature again, I concluded that the approach taken by Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) was similar to this study’s preliminary objectives. Consequently, I elected to use the six themes they identify and present, which they based on over 60 interviews with students about these students’ service-learning outcomes. This list of six themes provided a simple and parsimonious system for coding the data. My intent was to add categories if necessary. This was determined to be unnecessary as the six categories were sufficient to code all of the data, both in the pilot coding and in the subsequent coding.

Coding Procedures

Two independent coders reviewed the author’s six themes and all 60 student papers. The (same) assignment guidelines given to all students over the five semesters clearly specified where the discussion of benefits obtained by the undergraduates should appear in their paper. This simplified the process of unitizing the data. The coders met and identified the units of analysis. The unit of analysis used was the discernible, isolated thought expressed by the student. Typically, the thought units were found within a paragraph, but there also were instances where a student expressed multiple, discrete, thought units within a paragraph (and in a few cases, multiple thought units were found within a sentence). Discrepancies between how coders identified discrete units were discussed until the coders agreed on the units to be coded. The pilot coding resulted in 378 units; the final coding resulted in 373 agreed-upon units.

These 373 thought units were coded into the framework using the letters “A” through “F” to code the data. The six themes were: (A) personal development; (B) sense of belonging/connection with others; (C) commitment to active citizenship; (D) enhanced academic understanding of subject matter; (E) ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another setting; and (F) ability to reframe complex social issues.

All outcomes reported as realized by the undergraduate students were categorized using this coding system and the coding system accounted for all outcomes identified. Intercoder reliability was initially calculated at 86.74%. Following initial coding by the two coders, discrepancies in category assignment were discussed to reach 100% agreement. A total of 272 (72.9%) thought units came from the “higher performers” in the course; a total of 101 (27.1%) thought units came from the “lower performers” (see discussion below of higher and lower performers). The mean for units coded per paper/student for the higher group was 6.8. The mean for units coded per paper/student for the lower group was 6.1.

Following the process of coding the data into the six themes, dominant themes for all students were identified (see Tables 1 and 2). Attention then turned to determining if any differences could be found between “higher performers” and “lower performers.” Final course grade was used to differentiate these groups of students.

The CYI course is a restricted course, with admission by instructor approval. Students admitted to the program are typically upper-division students in good standing. As a restricted course, and given the course’s nature (particularly due to the close working relationship shared by instructor and student throughout the course), grades in CYI tend
to be high. Students typically fall into two main groups: higher performers and lower performers. For the purposes of this study, “higher performers” are operationally defined as students assigned a grade of “A,” “A-,” or “B+.” “Lower performers” are operationally defined here as students assigned a grade of “B” or lower. Though I do not wish to suggest that a “B” student constitutes a low performer, in the context of this class, and given how the grades usually are assigned, a grade of “B” reflects that the student failed to perform in several significant areas in this course. I also recognize that other factors go into a student’s final course grade, but given critical reflection’s central role in the students’ grade in this program, and given the emphasis applied to these papers in calculating students’ course grades, final grades were selected as the best indicators of student performance. A secondary check followed, to ensure that this determination was appropriate. After numbering the student papers to conceal their identity, I reviewed a separate list of the student rosters from this time period. These rosters provided students’ names without final course grade information. Each student was assigned to a “higher” or “lower” category, based on my recollection of the student’s work in the course. I then compared my secondary student assignments to higher or lower performance groups to the actual grades assigned in the class. In all cases, the decision to use the grade of “B” as the differentiation point to determine higher and lower performers was upheld. That is, students I independently identified as higher performers did in fact receive grades of B+ or better in the course. Students I independently identified as lower performers, upon checking the grade assigned, consistently were found to have been assigned a grade of “B” or lower. All students included in this analysis passed the course. Of the 60 students included in the study, 42 were “higher performers” (70% of respondents) and 18 were “lower performers” (30% of respondents). Most participants in the study were female (71.7% female versus 28.3% male) which is consistent with the demographics for our major. Of the 42 students classified as higher performers, 32 (76.2%) were female and 10 (23.8%) were male. Of the 18 students classified as lower performers, 11 (61.1%) were female and 7 (38.8%) were male. Beyond demographic information, the participant’s sex was not taken into consideration in this study.

An analysis of the data yielded the results in Table 1 below.

Results

My first objective in this study was to determine what outcomes students reported in the service-learning CYI course over a three-year period (see Table 1). More than one third (38.28%) of the data coded identified personal development as a major benefit associated with the course. Students reported learning about themselves, gaining increased confidence, realizing strengths they had not previously been aware of, etc. For example, one student wrote, “Personally, I learned some useful things about myself, some good, some bad.” Another student observed, “I learned that I am a person who works well with individuals and that I always volunteer to do things that are sometimes over my head.” A third comment in this area speaks to the impact the course had on students relative to career development:

This may sound corny, but that is the day I made the final decision that I wanted to get my teaching credential and become a teacher. I always knew that I wanted to teach, but it was not until that day that I realized that I have to teach as my career.

The central and dominant role of personal growth is reflected in the following comment:

When I first came into the program, I felt a little nervous and apprehensive about speaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Personal Development</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging</th>
<th>Active Citizenship</th>
<th>Enhanced Academic</th>
<th>Ability to Apply</th>
<th>Ability to Reframe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class I</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class II</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class III</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class IV</td>
<td>39.7%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class V</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Mean)</td>
<td>38.28%(1)*</td>
<td>15.54%(3)*</td>
<td>10.40%(5)*</td>
<td>12.76%(4)*</td>
<td>19.74%(2)*</td>
<td>3.28%(6)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number in parentheses represents rank order of response frequency
and teaching students, but as the class progressed, so did my confidence and desire. As the class ended, I could honestly say I learned as much about myself as I learned about teaching. This was a time of growth and transition in my academic career, and once again, I found myself coming out on top.

Also significant to students across all classes over the three-year period was the ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another setting. This category accounted for 19.74% of all responses. Here, students valued the chance to apply abstract principles to real world interactions. One student stated, “I learned so many vital lessons that you can only learn through first-hand experience.” Similarly, another student noted, “In this class, the opportunity existed to participate in the type of hands-on training that cannot take place in the regular classroom setting.” Another student asserted the value gained from applying skills to another context: “I have taught children everything I know on how to play the game of baseball. But never had I taught before in a classroom setting.” Finally, one student claimed:

My knowledge, skill, and ability to give and evaluate speeches . . . increased tremendously. Through the years of speech communication classes, I have been told . . . what makes a quality speech, but to actually put forth an effort to educate others on this topic . . . has been the single greatest benefit to me from this program.

Kezar (1998) addresses the impact of service-learning courses relative to the ability to promote a sense of belonging or closeness among service-learning participants. The third outcome realized by students involves their ability to connect with others as a result of their service-learning experiences. Comments coded in this category accounted for 15.54% of the total units coded. Examples of student ideas contributed in this category include the following: “Working with the other assistants allowed me to form friendships that I would have never had the chance to make,” and, “For the first time, I was not being tutored. My ‘colleague’ was suggesting to me a better way to do something. I loved that feeling of camaraderie.” Through the service-learning class, students identified an increased opportunity to get to know others in the program more closely and to work together as a team toward the program’s common good.

Students also reported enhanced academic content understanding. As indicated earlier, many students enrolled in the CYI program benefit from the refresher they obtain in CYI. Before they can teach others about public speaking, they need to make sure that their foundation is strong and that their thinking is clear. In all, 12.76% of the comments referenced this benefit. As one student wrote, “The program also acted as a review for me in such areas as outlines, speech delivery, anxiety, etc.” Another student identified the additional understanding he gained from his association with the service-learning class: “As a result of working with CYI, I have a better understanding and appreciation of public speaking.”

A fifth benefit recognized by 10.4% of the students was recognizing the importance of commitment to active citizenship. Students reported being proud of their contribution to the students from the community, to the younger students’ education, and developing their public speaking skills. One student asserted the need for this program due to cuts in extracurricular programs in school systems:

Due to budget constraints, the school system has all but eliminated anything they consider to be “frills,” and this is a real detriment to the students who are missing out on some important information. The average student is receiving little or no training in the area of communication—a skill that is absolutely essential for success in today’s world, on both a professional and personal level. Our CYI students will have a definite advantage.

The opportunity to influence others is noted in this student’s comments: “Being in the role of a teacher’s assistant gave me the honor and privilege to share my experiences and knowledge in speech communication with a youthful and eager bunch of kids.” The following comments speak to the pride undergraduates experienced due to their association with the service-learning class. “All the way throughout the program, I had the sense that we were really making a difference in the participants’ lives.” Similarly, another student contributed: “CYI is where everything starts for our future communication leaders. I am glad I took part in it by knowing that our CYI made a difference in a student’s life.”

The final thematic area addresses students’ increased ability to reframe complex social issues that results from service-learning pedagogy. This area was ranked last, accounting for 3.28% of the total units coded. This category highlighted major realizations students experienced based on course participation. Several participants commented on viewing the youth population (and professors) differently: “I learned that professors are people too and it was refreshing to work with young adults who seem to be the antithesis of what is portrayed
Another undergraduate student reached a similar conclusion with regard to the youth population: “The media’s portrayal of high school kids is so negative these days; it is refreshing to see that there are still so many great kids out there with a ton of potential.”

In summary, the 60 final critical reflection papers were coded using the six themes developed by Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996). Personal development and ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another setting were determined to be particularly important outcomes for all 60 students over the three-year period. Moderate frequencies were found for sense of belonging, enhanced understanding of issues and subject matter relevant to the content being taught, and commitment to active citizenship. Ability to reframe complex social issues was identified as a valued outcome for service-learning participants, but cited much less so than the other themes.

The second stage in this study, and the question that primarily motivates it, concerns differences observed between higher and lower performers in the service-learning course. My objective was to compare the outcomes reported by students identified as higher performers (grade of “B+” or higher), with the outcomes reported by lower performers (grade of “B” or lower). Comparing these two groups did reveal several differences (see Tables 2 and 3).

Students at the higher end of the grading scale (42 of the 60) reported the following outcomes. Again, personal development was the top outcome (37.1%), followed by ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another setting (20.2%). Third was the connection students were able to establish due to service-learning approaches (17.3%), followed by enhanced academic understanding (11.4%). Fifth-ranked was commitment to active citizenship (9.6%). Finally, ability to reframe complex social issues was last (4.4%).

Examining the outcomes identified by students in the lower performance group revealed several differences, when compared to the higher performance group (see Tables 2 and 3). Personal development continued to be the top category, accounting for 40.6% of responses (versus 37.1% for the higher group). Second for the lower group was ability to apply knowledge and skills (18.8% for the lower group versus 20.2% for the higher group). Third-ranked among the lower group was enhanced understanding of academic subject matter (15.8% for the lower group versus 11.4% for the higher group). The fourth-ranked benefit for students in the lower group was commitment to active citizenship (14.9% versus 9.6% for the higher group). The next highest ranked outcome for the lower group was the ability to connect with others (9.9% for the lower group versus 17.3% for the higher group). Finally, no messages were coded in the remaining category—ability to reframe complex social issues—for the lower group (0.0% for the lower group versus 4.4% for the higher group). Thus, the order of the rankings for the higher and lower groups differed, and the comparative strength of the rankings also differed.

Discussion

My primary objective in this study was to determine if differences existed between higher performing and lower performing students in a service-learning class. Service-learning instructors often reference common expected outcomes resulting from student participation in service-learning classes. We are confident in our claims that students benefit from this engaging pedagogy form. Service-learning research is beginning to confirm what service-learning practitioners have known intuitively all along—that service-learning offers unique benefits to our students. But do all students benefit from this learning experience? Do they all benefit in the same way? The data presented in this study suggest that both higher and lower performing students benefit from service-learning approaches in ways consistent with practitioners’ expectations. The data here also suggest that these benefits range across varied thematic outcomes, and though experienced by students to varying degrees, are accrued across at least five of six major areas.

Table 2
Rankings for Total Mean Responses for Higher Performance Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Personal development</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ability to apply knowledge/skills learned to another setting</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sense of belonging/connection with others</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Enhanced academic understanding of subject matter</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Active citizenship commitment</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ability to reframe complex social issues</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Earlier in the paper, several questions were outlined related to students’ ability to “get it.” Based on the findings obtained in this analysis, several answers can be provided. First, in response to the question, “Do students get it?”, the data reported here suggest that, yes, students are realizing positive outcomes and these outcomes are consistent with the themes developed by Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996). Thus, even the lower performing students identify that they have benefitted from their service-learning experience. Thus the question, “Do the lower performers get anything?” changes to “What do the lower performers get?” The data reported here suggest that these lower performers realize many of the same outcomes reported by the higher performing students, though several differences were found.

Similarities between the higher and lower groups were observed in students’ identifying their top two learning outcomes. Both the higher performers and the lower performers reported that personal development was their top outcome (37.1% for the higher group, 40.6% for the lower group). Both groups ranked ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to other settings as their second highest outcome (20.2% for the higher group, 18.8% for the lower group). Combined, the categories of personal development and ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to other settings accounted for 57.3% of the reported outcomes for students in the higher group and 59.4% of the outcomes for students in the lower group. Thus, these two outcomes were important to both groups and accounted for most of the units coded.

Several significant differences also were noted. The higher group’s third ranked outcome was sense of belonging/connection with others (17.3%). This ranking was 7.4% higher than the percentage reported for the lower group. The third ranked outcome for the lower group was enhanced understanding of academic subject matter (15.8%, versus 11.4% for the higher group). A similar difference was noted comparing percentages for commitment to active citizenship. The lower group ranked this area fourth (14.9%), while the higher group ranked it fifth (9.6%). Finally, the last ranked outcome for both groups was ability to reframe complex social issues. A total of 4.4% of the higher group’s outcomes were coded into this category. The lower group did not report any outcomes in this area.

What do these data suggest? First, it is significant to note that the two groups were similar in outcome numbers reported per student (6.8 for students in the higher group versus 6.1 for students in the lower group). Also interesting is the finding that almost 60% of both the higher and lower performing student’s outcomes fell into the two categories: personal development, and ability to apply knowledge and skills learned in one setting to another setting.

Comparing the higher and lower performers also reveals some interesting differences. Though both groups ranked sense of connection with others, enhanced academic understanding, and commitment to active citizenship in the third, fourth, or fifth rank, the order and relative strength of these three themes differed. Students in the higher group valued the connection with others that was fostered through course participation. This value was not as significant for students in the lower group. Perhaps students in the higher group tend to be more socialized into the value and rewards of establishing and maintaining relationships with others in the discipline. It is possible that cultivating stronger bonds among students is correlated with higher course performance. On the other hand, students in the lower group favored service-learning’s ability to enhance their understanding of course content. This difference between the two groups might be explained by the expectation that higher performers might begin the course with greater understanding of course content generally. Differences likely exist between the two groups relative to the academic preparation they bring to the service-learning experience. Perhaps one positive outcome for the lower performing students is their ability to better understand their academic content (which is presumed to be a precursor to one’s ability to accurately apply these concepts).

Another interesting finding involves the difference observed in students’ commitment to active citizenship. The lower group reported this outcome...
to a greater degree than did the higher group. Reasons for this difference cannot be determined from the data. Perhaps lower performing students are more externally and/or community focused.

With regard to the final question, “Do the lower performers only get ‘a little bit’ of it?”, I must conclude no. Higher performers provided coded responses at a rate of 6.8 (mean) per final reflection paper. Lower performing students provided coded responses at a rate of 6.1 per paper. Thus, both groups identified that they had realized outcomes consistent with the six themes used in this analysis.

One important contribution made by this study involves the theoretical testing of the Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) categories. The six themes identified by them provided a useful coding system for content analysis of learning outcomes realized by students in this service-learning class, and for comparing differential learning outcomes reported by higher and lower performing students.

Finally, these data suggest that all participants in this service-learning course benefited from their participation. These benefits were observed for higher and lower performing students across all six themes over the three-year period examined. Reasons for the differences observed are not clear from these data. It is reassuring to know that, at least for this particular service-learning class, all students got something, and the something they report receiving is consistent with basic service-learning principles. Future investigations into the reasons for differential outcomes would add to the present analysis. Also, comparing different service-learning class types relative to the approach taken here would be helpful to allow greater confidence in asserting the claim, “Yes, they are getting it—and they are getting it, regardless of how well they perform in the class.”

Note

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References


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