Applied learning: Dance, design, and community

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Abstract

Universities have a long history of making important contributions to their surrounding communities. As a result, service learning has become an important form of learning in higher education in the United States. Current research reveals that connecting the classroom to the community through service learning is an effective pedagogical strategy. Students apply classroom knowledge in practical settings to enhance their understanding of course materials. Accordingly, they demonstrate improved academic content knowledge, critical thinking skills, written and verbal communication, and leadership skills (Eyler & Giles, 1990; Furco, 2011; Sedlak et al., 2003; Voglegesang & Astin, 2000). The purpose of the *Applied learning: Dance, design, and community* project was to examine the impact of the collaborative process, via service learning, on dance and design students' higher-order thinking, not only in their own, but others' arts discipline.

Prior successful service-learning collaborations with community groups formed the foundation of the *Applied learning: Dance, design, and community* project, which combined students from Teaching Dance (DAN 401), Costume Design (THA 335), with 7th- and 9th-grade students from the Lafayette High School Bridges program, and refugee children who arrived in Buffalo representing no fewer than 15 nations. The study used the Burchfield Penney Art Center installation, "Taking Tea," as a touchstone to connect all students in a collaborative partnership that explored artistic concepts through critical thinking and kinesthetic activities. Each lesson inspired student-developed stories told through dance and costume elements that culminated in a student-created performance art presentation at the Burchfield Penney in May 2015.

Pre-test surveys obtained information on background, service-learning experience, and preconceptions about collaboration. Course content delivered by faculty and meetings with community partners guided the students' learning. Random groups were established to develop design inspirations and movement lesson plans. Throughout the project, the Buffalo State students used a rubric to assess themselves of their understanding of course content, contribution to the project, and level of collaboration. Data was also gathered via video capture and post testing.

Data collected from the *Applied learning: Dance, design, and community* project indicated that embedding a collaborative potential to service learning in SUNY Buffalo State dance and design courses resulted in a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas between faculty, students, and community partners, each providing an essential component to the process, resulting in a vital product. DAN 401-Teaching Dance and THA 335-Costume Design students were more successful at learning course concepts through practical application, showing advancement in academic skills, critical thinking, creativity, and communication, as well as effective development in leadership, teamwork, personal responsibility, and pride in their community.

The collaboration element provided an additional layer of learning. By engaging in pre-flection of the arts integration lesson prior to the service learning experience, the students found themselves teaching their content area to each other. They became more aware of the significance of each other's art and how each augments the other by developing an understanding of each other's design concepts, artistic symbols, and styles. Faculty, in turn, affirmed their conviction that collaborative experiences enhance pedagogical practices.

Keywords: collaborative learning, service learning, arts integration, reflection, community engagement

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Joy Guarino teaches a variety of studio-technique classes, choreography, dance history, and dance education courses. She has developed courses, conducted research, and presented internationally on kinesthetic learning, dance/movement integration, and service learning. She enjoys working creatively with professionals and students, and has presented her choreography internationally. Ms. Guarino earned her MFA from Temple University and holds a NYS Teacher's Certification in Dance. As a practitioner and consultant in the arts-in-education profession, both personally and as a mentor for her students, she is committed to finding creative and practical ways of designing and implementing meaningful children's arts programs.

Ann Emo came to higher education following a professional career as a costume designer in New York City and western New York. While she continues her work in theater, her current focus as Chair of the Theater Department at SUNY Buffalo State is

on curriculum design and assessment. Ann's specific interests include service learning and civil engagement, international study, the intentional connection of interdisciplinary coursework, active learning, and the development of "21st Century Skills" through the study of the arts. She is an active member of the Buffalo State community, sitting on committees including College Senate, Strategic Planning, and Learning Community Oversight.