Developing global citizenship:
Service learning and groupwork in an undergraduate seminar

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Abstract: This article explores an attempt to develop global citizenship through a service-learning experience that placed undergraduate students in community organizations that serve refugee populations. It begins with a discussion of the importance of civic engagement in higher education and how service learning, as a pedagogical method, can advance the goals of civic engagement and community building. It discusses how groupwork in class, with service providers, and with refugees led to increased civic awareness and transformed student dispositions toward diverse community groups.

Keywords: service-learning; civic engagement; refugees; international education

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Introduction

A service-learning course at the University of Southern Maine (USM) entitled *The Refugee Experience: From There to Here* (spring semester 2009) was designed to immerse students in a culture other than their own by having them work with refugee communities in the Portland, Maine area. The genesis of the course arose from a realization that students did not have to travel abroad to have an international experience that would engage and expand their awareness of community diversity and build skills that would foster their development as global citizens (Green, 2002, 2003). Since Maine is the least diverse state in the United States with 95% of its population identified as Caucasian (2010 US Census), it is crucial to expose students to the diversity within their own community and increase their civic awareness and engagement. Most of the diversity found in the state comes from refugee populations.[1] Thus, the *Refugee* course was designed not only to expose student to the experiences refugees face during forced migration--fleeing from conflict, living in refugee camps, interacting with international agencies, dealing with the legal system, arriving in a new country, and acclimatizing to a new life—but also to provide students with a practical experience with the refugees themselves in order to increase civic awareness and engagement.

Civic engagement and global citizenship

The fact that civic engagement is included in many US Universities' mission statements places it at the heart of what higher education aspires to instill within its student body (Colby et al, 2003). Yet the myriad of definitions relating to civic engagement, and the diverse practices claiming to develop this capacity, indicate that civic engagement may be all things to all people. In its broadest sense, civic engagement means activities with a community. More specifically, civic engagement 'means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference' (Erhlich, 2000, Preface page vi).

Inherent in the above definition is a belief that through participation with a community students will develop capacities that ultimately lead

them to become more active citizens, which in turn not only benefits themselves but also the community. The basis of this view is embedded in the 'republican tradition' (Dalhgren, 2007; Walker, 2000), traced to de Tocqueville's (1969) observation, in the 1830s, that involvement in American public life was seen not just as a duty, but as something offering its own personal rewards. Participating in the democratic process not only connects people to each other, it develops individual abilities that otherwise would remain unfulfilled. As education pioneer John Dewey (1916) taught us, democracy does not happen automatically, it is a learned activity. Active participation in a democracy requires civic awareness and the cultivation of individual dispositions that are important for the success of the community. In this conception, the primary purpose of civic engagement, and higher education's role in promoting it, is to produce a new generation that has the knowledge, the skills, and the dispositions of private and public character that support a democracy (Prentice, 2007).

Civic learning and service learning

Many educators argue that if the goal is to prepare students for a lifetime of engaged citizenship we can do this more effectively if we integrate classroom learning with direct and substantial 'experiential learning in the larger world where practical political decision making and democratic deliberation occur' (Ehrlich, 1999, p. 245). The best way to achieve civic learning outcomes is to structure learning environments where students critically evaluate information, express opinions, tolerate divergent viewpoints and collectively work on community related problems. This affords students the opportunities to 'collaboratively explore contested issues in contemporary society, and … test, experientially as well as intellectually, the societal consequences of different policies and courses of action' (Knefelkamp & Schneider, 1997, p. 341).

Many in the educational community have embraced service-learning as the primary way to accomplish this goal (Barber, 1992; Barber and Battistoni, 1993; Kirlin, 2002). One of the most cited definitions of service-learning explains it as 'an educational methodology which combines community service with explicit academic learning objectives, preparation for community work, and deliberate reflection' (Gelmon et al, 2001, p. v) to produce an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.

The central objective of service learning is the development of lifelong habits of engagement and democratic citizenship at the national and global levels (Carpini, 2000; Patrick, 2000).

Some find that participation in service learning experiences correlates positively with academic development (Billig, 2002; Meyer, 2003) because it expands on what students learn through lectures and readings (Ehrlich, 1999, p. 245). However, a service-learning experience, in and of itself, does not advance civic learning specifically. A review of the literature on service learning highlights this concern. Some scholars find that service learning does indeed promote civic values and citizenship-related issues (Hunter & Brisbin, 2000; Prentice, 2007; Perry & Katula, 2001; Smith, 2006) whereas others report mixed results (Campbell, 2000; Kirlin, 2002; Shumer & Belbas, 1996; Strage, 2000). These studies tell us that introducing service learning into a curriculum will not automatically lead to increased civic engagement or student learning. The service learning experience must incorporate an intentional focus on instilling civic *knowledge*, *skills* and *dispositions* that lead to civic engagement (Patterson, 2000). In essence, there must be *civic learning* in service learning for civic engagement to occur (Ehrlich, 1999).

Refugee course learning goals

A service learning course focused on instilling global mindedness should increase student's civic knowledge and awareness of community, impart civic skills to increase students' abilities to partake in the community, and cultivate dispositions that will make it more likely that students will tolerate and embrace community diversity at the local, national and global levels. It is hoped that the development of this capacity will empower students to become engaged in civic life. Thus, the *Refugee* course was designed intentionally to embed civic learning in the service learning activities.

Civic Knowledge/Civic Awareness

A certain amount of factual knowledge is a prerequisite for becoming an engaged citizen whether at the national or global level. As one study

notes, 'Simply put, while one can debate the amount or content of information a person 'needs' to know, it is difficult to imagine either an educated student or an engaged citizen who is unfamiliar with the substance, key actors, institutions, and processes of politics' (Carpini & Keeter, 2000, p.176). Civic learning involves students coming to understand the democratic processes of a community, its history, the problems it faces, and the richness of its diversity (Ehrlich, 1999). In general, a working knowledge of the institutions and processes of society demystifies the political process and leads to enhanced efficacy and hopefully involvement of its citizens. According to Lang (2010), groups have the following significant functions, they provide a humanizing and socializing experience, ongoing social influence, a sense of identity, self definition, self esteem, and personal identity, a training ground and vehicle for responsible citizen partnership.

A goal of the *Refugee* course was to instill within a parochial student body awareness of an international community group already residing within their community. However, studies have shown that simply requiring students to volunteer with a service organization will not necessarily produce civic awareness (Battistoni, 2002; Carpini & Keeter, 2000; Eyler & Giles,1999; Hepburn et al, 2000). Barber and Battistoni (1993, p.235) explain that by segregating service from civic responsibility it becomes 'associated with altruism or charity-a supererogatory activity of good men and women rather than an obligatory activity of responsible citizens.' Of course, service learning does share volunteer aspects with community service but, for service learning to promote civic engagement, it should recognise 'mutual responsibility and interdependence of rights and responsibilities, and it focuses not on altruism but on enlightened self-interest' (Barber & Battistoni, 1993, p.237).

Hence, for service learning to promote civic engagement is must be reciprocal. Reciprocity creates 'a sense of mutual responsibility and respect between individuals in the service-learning exchange' (Kendall, 1990, p.22). Keith (2005, p.15) argues that reciprocity 'emphasizes respectful listening of perspectives and histories, together with community-building and possibly advocacy in an environment that acknowledges difficult emotions and political choices.' By understanding that the relationship with the community partner is one of mutual interdependence, students gain the perspective that the

'community' is not those with problems but are a group to which we all belong. For service learning to promote civic engagement, community problems should be mutually defined and service-learning projects should be identified and developed in collaboration with a community partner. This, in turn, leads to the student's development of a heightened awareness and understanding of community issues, needs, strengths, problems and resources. This can only occur through collaborative groupwork with a community partner.

Civic skills

What skills do our students need to learn to be engaged and active members of a local or global community? Academia should promote student acquisition of skills that are essential to the art of political participation in whatever form it takes. Specifically this entails students obtaining the ability to explain, analyze, interact, evaluate, and defend a position, and monitor processes and outcomes. Thus, vital civic skills include critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Critical thinking is a vital civic skill because it allows students to assess the authenticity, accuracy and worth of knowledge claims, beliefs, or arguments (Barber & Battistoni, 1993; Beyer, 1983). Critical thinking skills also help students learn to differentiate between fact (statements which can be proved true), and opinion (statements that express judgments or ideas) and enable citizens to critically evaluate what they read, hear, view, and write (Novelli, 1999). Citizens of a democracy also need communication skills to put forth opinions and arguments for continuous debate; if not presented in an effective manner, great ideas may be of little value. Hence, a democratic society relies upon citizens' abilities to communicate effectively and to develop careful listening skills to ensure a message is heard. Participatory skills of citizenship in democracy include interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests for collective action. While working in groups, there is a sense that the students have made a social contribution, have developed a greater sense of identity and obtained compromise skills (Beckman, 1990). 'Collaborative learning…is also an important tool for training students to enter a democratic society in which citizens interact with each other, learn from each other, disagree with each other, grow with each other, and work together to make their communities more

than the sum of its parts' (Ehrlich, 1999, p.246).

The best way to advance the above civic skills is by adopting a problem-based learning (PBL) instructional method. PBL challenges students to 'learn to learn,' working cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real world problems. Students access information and resources, apply knowledge, and exercise skills needed for problem solving to occur. The inherent 'messiness' of PBL mirrors real world conditions that confront citizens in the public arena (Gordon, 2003,p. 3). These problems are used to engage students' curiosity and initiate learning the subject matter.

Consequently, the *Refugee* course adopted a PBL approach in the service learning environments. Each student was required to work on a problem faced by the community partner that was mutually defined and collaboratively constructed. Interacting with refugee communities enhances problem solving skills because, as one scholar notes, 'international contexts are also likely to foster a greater problem-solving and critical thinking on the part of students, due to the ways in which culture, language, religion, and beliefs are under constant challenge in foreign settings' (Berry, 1990, pp.304-305).

Scholars warn that when using a PBL approach, it is important not to over structure the service-learning experience. Students need to learn and practice civic skills through the process of designing and organizing their activities themselves. Sometimes, service-learning programs are too structured and deny students opportunities for problem-based learning (Kirlin, 2002, p. 573). Opportunities should be available for students to organize themselves, decide on objectives and collectively make decisions. An educator's role should be to help students identify the problem that exists, who they will interact with in the community to solve the problem and what project they will undertake. In essence, educators will practise civic virtues by letting students 'have a voice' in the service-learning project (Morgan & Streb, 2001; Temple, 2003). Kirlin (2002, p. 573) explains, 'Giving students the opportunity to identify fellow students with similar concerns and then to decide what they will do about it is an important first step. Underlying this relatively simple step are several skills including voicing one's opinion, expressing interests, identifying like-minded individuals, and reaching consensus about actions' (Kirlin, 2002, p.574). In this scenario, educators will facilitate civic learning by becoming a 'guide on the side' who asks

important questions, provides logistical and emotional support and encouragement, but not prepackaged experiences.

Civic dispositions

It is hoped that gaining civic knowledge and awareness and learning the skills that promote democratic processes students will develop civic dispositions such as civility, courage, integrity, concern, tolerance and curiosity and instill civic values such as justice, inclusion and participation (Saltmarsh, 2005, p.53) which will serve them well in their roles as global citizens. We expect our students will become considerate of the feelings, needs, and attitudes of others. The outcome of a service learning experience aimed at instilling civic dispositions is that, as one educator stated, 'Students can develop their moral voice and sense of community as well as instill a sense of efficacy and the ability to lead' (Ehrlich, 1999, p. 245). One of the primary goals of the *Refugee* course was to challenge the parochial views of Maine students and develop a tolerance, sensitivity, respect and appreciation of diverse groups in their own community, which will prepare them for lives in an increasingly global society (Berry, 1990).

A host of studies demonstrate the potential of service-learning to increase cultural sensitivity and/or reduce stereotyping (Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996; Dunlap, 1997; Eyler, Giles, & Braxton, 1997; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Giles & Eyler, 1994) and enhance empathy (Potthoff et al, 2000). Having students work with communities they are not familiar with confronts ethnocentric attitudes (Borden, 2007). Students along with the service organizations work together to learn about other people and their social realities. Unavoidably, students' world-views are challenged as they confront a number of different and often conflicting beliefs and behaviors in settings that are typically outside of their range of experience. Indeed, this challenge to the student's belief system is a powerful variable in developing a sense of justice, service, and commitment to global issues, what is often labeled 'transformative' in international service- learning (Grusky, 2000; Kiely, 2004).

Structuring the service-learning course

Reflection and presentation

Scholars emphasize the role that critical reflection plays in service learning. They note that learning and development do not automatically happen as a consequence of experience, but emerge from deliberately designed reflective processes that accompany the service (Jacoby, 1996; Sullivan, 1999). This is what distinguishes service learning from volunteer work (Schwartzman, 2002). The process of reflection also helps students connect the service they are providing with the topics they are studying (Sternberger et al., 2005) and 'places the student in the center of the learning process as s/he takes a much more active role in identifying and documenting his/her growth as a learner' (Overfield 1987, p. 487). Critical self-reflection also aids in understanding cultural and social realities other than one's own. Studies have shown that 'factual knowledge void of critical self-reflection is insufficient for effective cross-cultural education' (Genor and Schulte, 2002) and for exploring beliefs regarding race and ethnicity (Komins and Nicholls, 2003).

Students in the *Refugee* course were required to partake in multiple points of reflection. The first was reflection on course materials facilitated in small group class discussions each week. Topics varied as the class traced the refugee experience from flight to acculturation/ assimilation. Students were also required to turn in weekly journals that recounted their service experience in light of specific issues, such as those contained in course content. Students examined their thoughts and experiences through journaling, and furthered the learning they did in relation to their service.

Students demonstrated their gained knowledge and abilities in service learning portfolios which included documents pertaining to the processes involved in the service learning project, as well as evidence of the project's outcomes, and the participant's evaluation of the learning experience. Service learning portfolios included: the service contract and logs, journals, evaluations by community members and an evaluation of the service-learning project (Reed & Koliba, 1995). Sharing the service learning experience with others required the students to reflect on which aspects of their service were most

significant, who they involved in their work, and how to present this information clearly and effectively (Reed and Koliba, 1995). Students in the *Refugee* course were asked to partake in an undergraduate research forum entitled 'Thinking Matters' where they shared the results of their projects, and in doing so, encouraged student initiative and celebrated its results. This was the final product of the course.

Groupwork

Working in groups is particularly salient when developing civic learning in students since group properties, such as integration and cohesion, can facilitate achievement of civic learning. As one study notes (Marcellow & Perrucci, 2009, p.696), 'More cohesive groups should facilitate more extensive face-to-face interactions which may, in turn, lead to more discussion of community issues and higher levels of community involvement.' Cohesive groups also offer members the opportunity to model and acquire civic skills, to exchange information, and to develop a sense of self-efficacy. This can lead to more interest and activity in the civic arena. Overall, groupwork, in service learning projects, produces, "social capital" which values social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Dekker and Uslaner, 2001; Uslaner, 2001). This furthers civic learning. Groupwork can occur in the classroom, at the service organization, and with the refugee community.

In the *Refugee* course, planned groups were formed so that students could undertake and share tasks in common, form relationships with each other and community members, as well as gain responsibility through collaborative groupwork. In class, students were assigned to small, weekly discussion groups of ten students and one instructor based on the nature of their service placement. For instance, since community agencies support refugees at different stages of their experience as 'new Mainers,' student assignments varied accordingly. Some students worked with agencies that focused on the 'reception' and 'decompression' of new arrivals, others assessed refugee populations to determine skill-sets and potential obstacles that may hinder employment and the achievement of self-sufficiency, such as literacy, or/and possible mental and physical health issues that surface during the acculturation phase of a refugee's

experience. Once students were assigned to service sites the small classroom groups were formed so that student 'specialists' on each specific aspect of the refugee experience would be represented in each group, and they could lead group discussion and share experiences with their classmates. Each week, the small groups would meet to discuss their service learning projects, issues in the community, and the course readings. The expertise developed within the group around a specific refugee issue and the sharing of lessons learned in the field encouraged group cohesion and integration. Also, small presentation groups of four to five students were formed around specific issues affecting the refugee community. For instance, those students whose projects focused on literacy, either adult or child, were assigned to the same presentation group and worked together to produce a panel presentation for the 'Thinking Matters' conference.

Groupwork at the agency sites included interactions with the service providers and the client populations. The nature of the group varied given the student's assignment. Some students found themselves as part of a 'team,' others were less integrated. Some worked with the same refugee group throughout the semester, others dealt with different clients each week. Overall, those who were integrated into the service provider group and worked with the same clients throughout the semester gained the most from their service learning experience.

Assessing the course learning goals

A focus group interview method was employed to gather qualitative information on students' perceptions of personal growth, their dispositions toward refugee groups, and knowledge of issues facing refugee communities. Since the class was already sub-divided into three small groups, personnel from the Office of Civic Engagement performed focused group interviews for approximately one and a half hours during the last day of class. Group responses were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed to assess whether the three course learning goals—increasing civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions--were achieved.

Civic knowledge: Awareness of community

As noted above, a goal of the *Refugee* course was to instill within a parochial student body awareness of an international community group already residing within their community. In order to judge whether this goal was achieved, it was determined that the direct question, 'Do you have an increased awareness of the refugee community?,' would invariably produce the response 'yes'. Instead, focus groups were asked a non-directed question about personal and course goals to see whether students would voluntarily offer statements that could be indicative of increased awareness of the refugee community within their community. Specifically, focus groups were asked the following two questions: *What were your personal learning goals for this community-based learning? What were the learning goals of the class?*

Students' answers to these questions demonstrated that their personal goals were to learn more about refugees and that they also believed that a learning goal of the course was to gain an increased awareness of refugees within the community. Straightforward articulated goals included:

> *A goal was to have education of the refugee experience married with an application of real-life experience of working with refugees.*

> *To be more aware, to get us more involved in the refugee community.*

> *Increase my comfort level in talking with refugees by learning through class about their experience and through service.*

> *To give us that experience. There's no better way to understand where people are coming from than actually involving yourself with those people.*

> *I wanted to get to know the people in the community. I was interested in getting to know more about the people (the refugee community) I was going to be working with - which I think was a class goal as well.*

However, students' articulated goals included other dimensions of civic knowledge than 'factual' knowledge. There was an awareness of shortcomings of the larger community in relation to the 'new Mainers.' Many referred to Maine's parochial nature and how important it was to

expand their knowledge about diverse groups. This was recognition of how their own culture could be enhanced in relation to learning about and interacting with another culture.

If you could generalize our Maine attitude, we are conservative we are reserved. So the course brought together groups of people who wouldn't normally have a reason to be engaged, and engaged discussion between those groups.

Coming from a small community in central Maine, there was never any differences in culture. So coming to Portland and being immersed in something different – and becoming comfortable with that – was a personal goal. Expanding my horizons, maybe?? A class goal was, as Mainers, we are Mainers and I think a point was to acknowledge and understand some culture besides our own.

A class goal was to put a face to the names, to put human beings to a situation. It's so easy for us to learn about these distant conflicts and you don't really think about the actual people involved, to personalize these distant conflicts that we learn about. The fact that we could work with them and hear their stories was amazing -- it kind of takes the isolation of living in Maine away.

In addition, some students went further and commented not only on their increased awareness of the refugee community, but also some understanding of how community needs were met or not met. As stated above, part of acquiring civic knowledge is the development of an awareness and understanding of community issues, needs, strengths, problems, and resources. Below are some examples of this heightened understanding.

The class confirmed for me the challenges that I thought refugees faced in Maine. An obstacle was that the organization I worked with did not have enough bilingual volunteers. I remember one particular refugee asking me if I could come more (because I was bilingual). The need was greater than I was able to meet. There were a lot of immigrants coming to that place and they only had one volunteer to work with them. It was overwhelming.

I've been able to talk to some really amazing people and ask them questions about their lives, what they think is important and have them share these things with me. That's been really cool, and the organization's at least getting something out of it.

I learned a great deal about the great generosity of this society at large. I was amazed at the many programs that are designed to help refugees. The organization where I worked, they have many ESL programs, they have programs for new arrivals who are seeking employment – training programs. They have programs to help low-income families. They offer a lot of benefits to these new arrivals, so I learned a great deal about the generosity.

I'm not from this community, but from interacting with it in this class, I have seen how helpful, local, personal, close-knit, and a really friendly community (this is). Whenever I talk to my refugee students they always tell me how nice Mainers are. And although I'm not a Mainer, I would have to agree.

A concern is that I didn't realize that a lot of these things were such a big issue. Like, there isn't enough help for these people. A lot of these services are lacking. What kind of society would this be if all our services were as lacking as they are in the refugee community?

Civic Skills: Student groupwork projects

Earlier, it was explained that a problem based learning approach was adopted in the *Refugee* class in order to develop students' civic skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaborative learning. Students were required to work cooperatively in groups to seek solutions to real problems facing the refugee community. Collaborative groupwork was important because for service learning to promote civic engagement, community problems should be mutually defined and service-learning projects should be identified and developed with the community partners. Consequently, the instructors' role was to provide logistical and emotional support but not a prepackaged experience. We decided not to over structure the service-learning experience and encouraged the students to design and organize their activities themselves and with their community partner.

Overall, this may have been a tactical mistake. Of the three learning goals of the course this goal was the least realized and the student projects proved to be the most challenging aspect of the course. This was to be expected given that students vary in their abilities to

structure their own environments and need to learn to be independent thinkers and develop the skills for working with others. However, an analysis of student statements reveal that lack of structure and differing perceptions between the service providers and course instructors led to frustration concerning one of the main components of the course, the service-learning project. When students were asked, '*Please describe your interaction with the community partner,*' a majority of the responses were very critical of the course in the following ways:

It was unclear what the service learning goal really was. In the class we were told to develop a project, but at the service site we were expected to fulfill other duties that the providers had planned for us.

You can learn something setting it up yourself, but the course isn't about learning to be a volunteer, it's about the refugee community…The expectations of the teachers and the expectations of the service providers weren't on the same page.

It was hard to fit my project ideas in with what my service provider had planned for me. Since I was a volunteer I felt that I should submit to them.

Some of the service providers didn't understand that students had to formulate a separate project to work on top of what they wanted us to do. Not only were we teaching ESL but we were also doing a second project and I don't think a lot of the service providers had that on their radar because they were talking about when students tried to take over a certain aspect or be creative with what they were supposed to do.

Thus, an assignment for students that, under the best of circumstances, is challenging was almost impossible given the mismatch between the expectations of the course and the expectations of the service providers. One cannot take for granted that service providers understand the nature of a service-learning class. Service sites most often deal with volunteers. Their organizational structures are made to be efficient given the small number of managers and the potentially large number of volunteers. One of the supervisor's jobs is to assign tasks to workers who have volunteered their time. However, the difference between volunteerism and service-learning is that in a service-learning situation we are asking more of the service site, we are asking for a partner who

will collaborate with our students to mutually define community needs and projects. Ideally, service learning involves the agency receiving much needed help and the student, as the provider of the service, learns something from the experience that further contributes to their education. In reality, community partners had few supervisors and could not devote the time and attention to develop projects with the students. In many instances this was seen as another burden on an already laden organization. Instead, they would rather assign students to already defined services and projects. In their journals, students noted that they very rarely even talked with the supervisor because they were so busy. The students also indicated that they did not have the confidence to approach the supervisor because they were not experts and they did not feel that it was their place to initiate a conversation about a project.

It is interesting to note that the negative assessment of the service-learning project articulated during the focus group interviews arose primarily in one class group, less so in another, and not at all in the third. Given that the small groups had student representatives from each of the service sites within them, one could make the argument that the nature of the small classroom group facilitated students' development of civic skills. The cohesion and integration of the group as well as the support from the teacher facilitator, may have led students to be more confident at the service site and more able to structure their own service project.

When the course was offered again the following semester, the instructor met with all service providers prior to the class start date and gave a mini lecture on the differences between service learning and volunteerism. The instructor clarified the goals of the course and asked for feedback from the providers. This simple step ensured that expectations were clear and that both parties were on the same page in relation to the students' work in the organization. Establishing the expectations of a partnership and more help with the student placements led to a better project outcome for everyone.

Civic Dispositions:
Tolerance and sensitivity to diverse groups

The main goal of constructing the *Refugee* course was to challenge the

parochial views of Maine students and help them develop a tolerance, sensitivity, respect and appreciation of diverse groups within their own community. To assess whether students' dispositions were changed, focus groups were asked, *'How would you assess your experience?'* Student responses indicated that to some, the service-learning experience made course concepts more 'real' and immediate. Learning about another culture through interactions with real people sobered them. For instance:

I came into this class not knowing that there was such a diverse community in Portland. I grew up in a bubble. Getting out there and seeing these people really opened my mind.

My overall experience was successful because I grew as a person, and if you can grow as a person, then that has to be successful. Cause it made you self-reflect and become a better citizen among a very diverse place.

They (the service provider) did a face-painting event and some kids wanted it but they had to wash it off before they went home because they didn't want to get in trouble. We understood that there were some cultural differences. It was good to see it. You know, you hear about things, but it's good to see it. Seeing it first hand gives you something extra…you might not notice it if you just meet somebody, but when you work with them, it triggers that instinct that these people are different.

Interacting with a group much different than their own would challenge the student's belief system. Unavoidably, students' world-views were challenged as they confronted a number of different and often conflicting beliefs and behaviors in settings that are typically outside of their range of experience. Indeed, the experience was 'transformative' because it challenged their belief systems.

I came into this class with a lot of pre-assumed prejudices from the usual political view of my affiliated party and from my parents and my world. I wanted to determine whether those outlooks were accurate or whether they should be altered. Going out into the community and doing the service learning made me think about my own views and the views of others. It helped me to better my perspective and better my reasons why I think the way I do. It helped me see that what I thought was right was not right. It helped me separate the black and white and realize

that this issue is more than what I see in the newspaper or watch on TV. Going out and working with these people gave me a completely different outlook on the refugee issues that we've been dealing with as a country. To learn more about my political views by interacting with the community that I was pre-judging without knowing them.

One rather poetic student even likened it to the transformation one experiences when they are in love.

It's like love – you can read about it all day long, but until you experience it, you have no idea how it can be – it's that same sort of . . . moving from concept to a physical.

Many students went beyond a transformative statement to an advocacy statement; they found their 'moral voice'. A common response from students in class during small group discussions was that they defended refugees when friends or family members said something derogatory about the group. For instance:

A lot of times I'd talk to people, and I wished that they could take this class so they would stop saying stupid things about refugees – like my grandmother.

I learned so much about what our service providers do in the community – about the actual refugee community here in Portland. I also saw some negatives. Whenever I talked to people about what I was doing in this class – especially old people – they have this old view of people coming into this country and using our resources – Welfare – as if regular, Caucasian Americans don't abuse it – and it made me very frustrated. I learned that though there are people in this class who are very caring and giving, there are those out there who need to be exposed to some truth.

I grew up in a different area where a lot of immigrants and refugees were coming to my community so I wanted to learn more about what was making them come here - the process - to have a better understanding of all that, so I could help educate others, because there's a lot of negative prejudice regarding the refugee community around here.

Conclusion

Overall the greatest success from the service-learning class was the changes that students experienced in themselves, which ranged from an explicit acknowledgement of the refugee experience and their cultures and customs, to a belief-system change, to an advocate stance. The refugee course was a success in imparting civic knowledge in the students. Indeed the following endorsement by one of the students speaks volumes for the course:

> *I definitely felt more emotionally connected to this class than I have to any other class. That's what you get when you mix class time with service learning time. It's more heartfelt work. You're actually going to remember what you did. It's not just a class it's the whole experience. And there was a definite connection between the two, because everything was directly related – at least for me. Put a face on what you've been reading about and it makes it so much more real.*

Note

1. Portland, Maine's largest city, is home to a local refugee community resettled by Catholic Charities of Maine's highly successful refugee resettlement program which has assisted in the resettlement process for over 5000 refugees from some 25 countries

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