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Professionalization of Service-Learning in Higher Education – An Academic Development Approach

Abstract

In an attempt to professionalize service-learning in higher education, teachers and their teaching skills are considered a determining factor and require particular attention. To promote the teaching skills necessary for service-learning courses, an academic development approach addressing these specific requirements has been implemented at Goethe University Frankfurt as part of the academic development program for teaching staff. This article presents the particularities of this approach and illustrates one of its central elements, i.e., the concept of a workshop on planning service-learning courses. Both practical and research implications are discussed.

Keywords

Service-learning, university teachers, teaching skills, academic development, faculty development

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1 Introduction

Student-centered and activating teaching have been playing an increasingly important role in university teaching across Europe (BARR & TAGG, 1995). Activating teaching formats are often constructivist in nature (cf. YOUNG & COLLIN, 2004), such as the instructional design of problem-based learning (HMELO-SILVER, 2004). As a specific and innovative form of problem-based learning (GERHOLZ, LISZT & KLINGSIECK, 2018), service-learning combines university teaching and learning with service activities in the community (e.g., BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1995) and has become increasingly popular in Europe and Germany in recent years (YOUNISS & REINDERS, 2010).

According to the literature, service-learning addresses both academic and non-academic learning goals as well as citizenship outcomes for students in addition to providing an essential community benefit (BUTIN, 2003; HATCHER & BRINGLE, 1997). Nevertheless, the factors determining these outcomes for students and the community in the context of higher education are not yet entirely clear. In an attempt to go beyond the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice (BILLIG & WEAH, 2008), possible predictors of successful service-learning in higher education were identified in expert interviews (MORDEL, KUCHTA, HECKMANN & HORZ, in prep.). In these interviews, factors of university teachers' professional knowledge and skills were mentioned repeatedly and comprised the teachers' general teaching skills and teaching skills specific for teaching service-learning. Therefore, to professionalize service-learning in higher education, both teachers' general and specific teaching skills for the implementation of service-learning should be jointly enhanced. Based on these results, an academic development approach for the professionalization of service-learning in higher education has been implemented at Goethe University Frankfurt (abbr. GU).

2 An academic development approach for the professionalization of service-learning

The Interdisciplinary College for University Teaching (abbr. IKH) is a central institution at GU that promotes the professionalization of academic teaching by supporting and facilitating teaching in higher education and offering an evidence-based academic development program for learning and teaching. This program offers all teaching staff to participate in workshops, benefit from individual counseling and coaching, and investigate their own teaching under qualified supervision (cf. HUBBALL & CLARKE, 2010), resulting in a graduate certificate in higher education. The IKH also engages in research activities on different aspects of learning and teaching in higher education.

The center for service-learning (funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research and internal university funds) is tightly connected with the IKH and provides a similar academic development approach that focuses on the teaching of service-learning courses. As part of this approach, the center has initiated a workshop series that represents the different stages of service-learning. Since the workshop series is associated with the IKH's graduate certificate for university teachers, both general teaching skills (e.g., characteristics of good teaching practice; cf. BIGGS & TANG, 2011) and essentials or specific skills for service-learning courses are addressed conjointly.

In terms of theory, the academic development approach is based on Bringle and Hatcher's model of the development of service-learning courses (BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1995). Applying Kolb's model of the experiential learning process (cf. KOLB, 1984) to the target group of faculty, Bringle and Hatcher propose a series of workshops with different foci: An introduction to service-learning; reflection as part of a service-learning course; community partnerships; student supervision and assessment; and course assessment and research (BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1995). On this theoretical ground, several workshops on teaching service-learning that cover three of these foci were implemented in the academic development approach described here: planning service-learning courses; designing reflection sessions;

and designing assessment and evaluation formats for service-learning. The first element of this workshop series, i.e., planning service-learning courses, was implemented in the IKH workshop program in the summer of 2017.

2.1 Description of the workshop concept

The workshop entitled “Planning Service-Learning Courses” is designed as an optional one-day workshop for university teachers who either teach or intend to teach a service-learning course. The aim of the workshop is to introduce a systematic, didactic strategy for planning service-learning courses in higher education. Participation in the workshop is open to teachers from different academic disciplines regardless of prior knowledge or expertise in the field of service-learning; this should offer the opportunity to benefit from the group’s heterogeneous experience and knowledge.

The workshop concept is based on constantly alternating between input and work phases as presented in Table 1. To address the heterogeneity of the group, participants work on their own service-learning courses, and specific questions are discussed in groups and individually both during and (if necessary) after the workshop.

Table 1: Teaching activities, topics and timeline of the workshop
 “Planning Service-Learning Courses”

Teaching/learning activities	Topics
Introduction; Getting to know one another	Participants’ experiences with service-learning (SL)
Input	Definition of SL; genesis; forms of SL; possible learning outcomes in SL; research findings
Individual work phase, presentation and discussion	Ideas for own SL project/course
Input	Recap: Constructive Alignment; Formulating learning goals; taxonomy of learning outcomes; goal management
Individual work phase and presentation; revision after feedback	Formulating intended learning outcomes for own SL course
Input	Criteria for successful SL; particularities of planning and implementing SL
Think-Pair-Share	Planning and structuring own SL course; finding and working with community partners
Input	Methods for reflection on learning process
Group work phase, presentation and discussion	Planning a reflection session
Individual work phase and presentation	Assessment in SL courses and measuring learning outcomes
Wrap-up	Feedback and evaluation

The workshop begins with encouraging the participants to share their service-learning experiences. After defining service-learning as an instructional design (cf. HOFER, 2007; SEIFERT, ZENTNER & NAGY, 2012) and providing information on its genesis, the trainers present an overview of different forms of service-learning along with the skills and learning outcomes that service-learning is argued to foster.

In the following exercise, the participants think about which of their courses allow for integrating or adding service-learning elements or whether their courses are suitable for a re-conceptualization. Afterwards, they present their ideas to one other and discuss them in regard to practice-orientation. Before elaborating on these ideas, the next input phase on the topic of intended learning outcomes draws on basic theoretical insights, for instance, the principle of constructive alignment and the SOLO taxonomy (cf. BIGGS & COLLIS, 1989). In the next exercise, the participants apply these theoretical principles by formulating learning goals for their (potential) service-learning course.

After working on the intended learning outcomes, the trainers introduce the participants to criteria for and principles of good service-learning (BILLIG & WEAH, 2008); different types of service-learning (cf. SIGMON, 1997); and the different phases of service-learning courses. Afterwards, the participants start working on a schedule for their own service-learning course, present their ideas to the group and give one other feedback. Before the next and last input phase, the participants are invited to brainstorm on how they could possibly find and recruit community partners, and what to consider in terms of communication.

As reflection is considered one of the central elements of service-learning (EYLER, 2002; HATCHER & BRINGLE, 1997), the last input offers basic information on the relevance of reflection and equips the participants with methods for boosting the reflection process. Consequently, under careful consideration of the participants' identified schedules, the next exercise asks the participants to start planning an exemplary reflection session. After presenting their ideas and giving one other feedback, the last exercise targets the topic of assessment in service-

learning courses under consideration of the learning goals identified earlier. The topics of reflection and assessment are considered in more detail within the other workshops of the series as outlined above. At the end of the workshop, the participants give feedback on the workshop and complete a standard questionnaire to evaluate the workshop.

2.2 Evaluation of the workshop concept

The evaluation was completed by all 7 participants (university teachers from different departments at GU and other universities in Germany) after the workshop. The questionnaire used is based on seven scales on general workshop satisfaction as well as self-reported learning outcomes that were partly adapted from established instruments (KAUFFELD, BRENNECKE & STRACK, 2009; STAUFENBIEL, 2000) and expanded by adding additional items constructed for this evaluation. Participants indicated their agreement to the statements assigned to the mentioned scales on a 4-point Likert scale. Additionally, they were asked for open statements on the workshop in general.

The results of a descriptive analysis (Figure 1) indicate that the participants were highly satisfied with the workshop. In particular, considering that the scale had a maximum value of 4, the successful integration of theory and practice ($M = 3.90$; $SD = .25$), participants' perceived learning outcomes ($M = 3.69$ $SD = .41$) and their assumed benefit for teaching practice ($M = 3.86$; $SD = .26$) were rated to be extremely high.

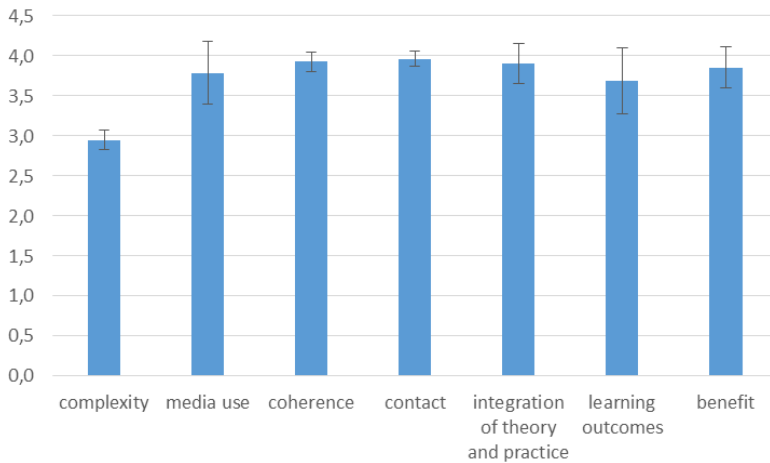


Figure 1: Descriptive analysis of evaluation scores (mean; standard deviation).

Additionally, with regard to the open statements, the participants emphasized their appreciation of the workshop's practice-orientated nature (e.g., the chance to plan their own service-learning course in the workshop) as well as the possibility of exchanging experiences and receiving feedback from colleagues. They recommended facilitating platforms for further exchange within and beyond the workshop.

3 Discussion

3.1 Practical implications

For the workshop concept, the positive evaluation indicates the importance of continuing education for university teachers on planning service-learning courses. The university teachers who participated rated both the theoretical input and the practical relevance of the workshop for planning their own service-learning course to be

very high. They particularly emphasized the importance of interacting with other teachers and exchanging experiences. This finding implies that reciprocal feedback among participants can be considered an essential part of both the workshop outlined above and other elements of the academic development approach. Due to the small number of participants and the lack of a control group, only descriptive analyses are reported, so the informative value of the data is limited. Furthermore, the validity of self-reported learning outcomes as well as workshop evaluations can be questioned (SCHMIDT & LOSSNITZER, 2010) and should be examined in relation to behavior-based and follow-up inquiries.

For the purpose of institutionalization of service-learning as an instructional design both at the individual and the institutional level (cf. BRINGLE & HATCHER, 1996, 2000), service-learning needs to be established as a teaching and learning format that is applied in order to achieve specific intended learning outcomes. Therefore, professional development and support for teachers in service-learning must be mindful of general teaching skills and oriented towards basic, evidence-based principles of learning and teaching in higher education. This implies a close connection of professionalization programs on service-learning to academic development programs for learning and teaching in general. Establishing the center for service-learning linked to the academic development program of the IKH shows a feasible way to achieve this goal.

3.2 Research implications

Aiming at the professionalization of service-learning, academic development programs and services for teachers of service-learning courses should be based on empirical evidence in the field of learning and teaching. Unfortunately, the evidence-based information and data available for the instructional design of service-learning are far from being satisfactory, especially with regard to the context of higher education in Germany (cf. REINDERS, 2016). While there is some evidence on the possible learning outcomes of service-learning scenarios in general (CELIO, DURLAK & DYMICKI, 2011; CONWAY, AMEL & GERWIEN, 2009; NOVAK, MARKEY & ALLEN, 2007; WARREN, 2012), little is known

about the determinants of these learning outcomes, differences between disciplines, institutional or individual and intradisciplinary or interdisciplinary implementation. To design and review workshop concepts based on empirical evidence, more research activities on service-learning as an instructional design in university teaching are required. This includes substantial empirical research projects on different levels; individual service-learning courses need to be investigated within different disciplines with regard to the benefits of service-learning in comparison to other instructional designs. Furthermore, data from individual service-learning courses can be pooled and compared to information on (interdisciplinary) service-learning projects across institutions in order to investigate service-learning as an instructional design across different forms of implementations and approaches.

Moreover, possible determinants of students' learning outcomes in service-learning regarding general and specific teaching skills as well as insights into students' learning processes need to be identified and examined. Based on these empirical findings, centers for service-learning can provide teachers with evidence-based information and material, and existing academic development approaches similar to the example described above can be refined and improved in order to promote the professionalization of service-learning in higher education.

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