

Applications of Service Learning through a Room Renovation Project

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Imagine your favorite memory with your family. Is it gathering around the fireplace, drinking hot cocoa, and playing games on a cold day? Maybe it is that one tradition your family has as the New Year approaches. Now stop. Imagine that same memory with no fireplace, no hot cocoa, no games; your family tradition is incomplete. All you have is a room at a shelter without anything that reminds you of that place you call home. We saw a place like this when visiting our local Salvation Army and knew right away we wanted to make a difference. Thankfully, as students in Family and Consumer Sciences Education (FCSE) at Purdue University, we have gained skills that have given us the ability to make a change in our community. These skills come from the variety of subjects in Family and Consumer Sciences, such as: housing, textiles, nutrition, foods, personal finance, child development, and more. In this program, we are preparing to teach middle and high school students about the many content areas of Family and Consumer Sciences. *Community Issues and Applications for Educators* (EDCI 350) is a required course in the FCSE teacher-education program. In this class, we completed an in-depth service learning project which is the source and focus of this article. The purpose of EDCI 350 is the “examination of diverse family and community characteristics and issues, and potential impacts on teaching and learning processes. The course includes interactions with human service agencies and personnel in schools and communities” (Purdue University Course Catalog). Our service learning project, in particular, taught us that it takes a significant amount of knowledge, time, and effort in order to have a large impact in our community.

During our first EDCI 350 class session, our professor presented information about service learning. We learned that service learning is “a teaching method that combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility” (Fox 2013). Our professor listed key elements of service learning as based on academic standards, including: planning jointly with community partners; meeting a real need; being student-directed; and including preparation, action, reflection, assessment, and celebration. During our first class session, we were introduced to the service learning project we would be involved with and we also were urged to consider ways we could use service learning in our future classrooms as Family and Consumer Sciences teachers. Three major formats for service learning were explained: Direct, Indirect, and Advocacy. Direct service learning requires physically participating at the community location and interacting with the people we are serving. Indirect service learning involves creating things that are given to the community partner, but it does not require being at the location or interacting directly with the people. Advocacy means that through our service learning project, we learn about underlying issues. The advocacy format seeks ways to support the community agency through fundraising and through communication that raises awareness with the larger community and especially with policy-makers.

We were able to lay a foundation for service learning through the main course textbook, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty: A Cognitive Approach* by Ruby K. Payne (2013). This was the inspiration for our service learning project. Through our readings, we learned about differences among socioeconomic classes and their hidden rules. Each socioeconomic class has

hidden rules no one talks about and are seen as common knowledge by those who know them. For example, according to Payne's book, when looking at the importance of food, the lowest socioeconomic class would ask "Did you have enough?" and quantity would be important. The middle socioeconomic class would ask "Did you like it?" and would find quality to be important. Lastly, the highest socioeconomic class would ask "Was it presented well?" and would find presentation most important. This knowledge made us aware that hidden rules really exist and we all have them whether we realize it or not. Even something as simple as communicating with those around us is affected by hidden rules. Our hidden rules dictate how we respond and react to certain remarks and body language. They also affect our expectations of others in terms of respect and behavior. Service learning is a way we can put our knowledge of hidden rules into practice.

The purpose of the service learning project was to use and build on our knowledge from our reading and skills as Family and Consumer Sciences educators by helping others in the community. For our service learning project, we could choose from a wide range of topics from teaching kids the proper way to wash their hands, teaching them how to complete an interview, or even renovating a family room. In past semesters, students in EDCI 350 had worked with the local Salvation Army and other community agencies for their projects. In order to help us get started, our professor arranged a time for our class to meet at the Salvation Army to hear from the staff and learn where they needed help. We were also given a tour of the building. During our visit, the staff mentioned that they needed help with the family room in the Family Shelter wing of the facility that serves families who need a temporary place to live. The Shelter has private rooms for families with children. The Shelter also has a kitchen, dining room, and family room shared by all of the guests. The family room was currently not being used for family time but instead as a quiet escape for the parents at the end of the day. They would put their children to bed, and then use the family room to watch television.

The need to renovate the family room caught our attention because, as FCSE students, we have taken several classes about child development and family processes. With this background knowledge, we know how spending time with their parents is vital for children's social and emotional development. It really impacts a child in a negative way when he or she does not have that family time. Without family time, "children will have a lack of appreciation, support, trust, and respect, compared to children who spend time with their family members. Children also learn how to interact with others through spending time with their family" (Ryder and Decker 2006, 77-84).

We wanted to help provide an inviting place for parents to bring their kids so that they all had a place to spend time together. Our service learning process included several steps. The first was choosing the family room renovation project. Upon choosing the project, we contacted the staff at the Salvation Army to set up a meeting to discuss what their thoughts were for a renovation. They were very open to all of our ideas and encouraged us to "shoot for the sky!" This meeting also gave us a chance to take a closer look at the room we were renovating and gave us an idea of what we could do with it. The staff members who were instrumental in helping us get started with the project were Major Jim Irvine (Corps officer and pastor), Major Pat Irvine (Corps officer and pastor), and Todd Wesbrook (Family Shelter Director). We met with them to take note of their ideas and what they needed in the family room. In addition, Envoy Audrey Schneider (Volunteer Coordinator at the Salvation Army) facilitated our class's involvement by coordinating class members' completion of the online application and training

that is required of Salvation Army volunteers and by assisting us with communication, scheduling, and many other details.

Based on our meeting with Salvation Army staff, we were able to start on step three of our service-learning process: preparation. This included doing background readings, determining specific goals and evidence for our project, and applying for a grant. We studied the Salvation Army Website (The Salvation Army 2014) and learned that its goal and mission is “described in these four words: to feed, clothe, comfort, and care, through preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination.” Along with other students in the class who were doing projects with the Salvation Army, we applied for a service learning grant through the Purdue University Office of Engagement. The grant application took a lot of time and effort to complete because this is where we really finalized what we were going to do with the room. We prepared a brief description of our project and an itemized list of proposed expenditures (**Figure 1**). This grant was funded, but only for a small portion of the amount we had requested. Our professor then contacted the Salvation Army and together they identified a donor who was willing to provide additional funding for the room renovation project. We received a total of seven hundred dollars, which enabled us to get started.

Next, we went out to local stores and purchased our supplies. We attempted to collect donations from local sources for the project but our efforts proved unsuccessful. During this phase, we set up more dates with the Salvation Army and planned a weekend to start the renovation. This took us a total of three days. The first two days were spent renovating, and then the last day was spent making blankets and art with the Salvation Army families for their new room.

Figure 1: Itemized List

Item	Cost of Each (\$)	Quantity	Total Cost (\$)
Design and Renovation			
Light Cover	119.00	1	119.00
Chalk Board Paint	10.97	1	10.97
Outlet Covers	2.97	1	2.97
Area Rug	79.99	1	79.99
Sofa Slip Cover	59.99	1	59.99
Command Strips for Hanging Frames	2.94	3	8.82
Furniture			
Trunk	19.99	1	19.99
Floor Lamp	4.99	2	13.98
Floor Lamp	8.99		
Table Lamp	7.97	1	7.97
Table Lamp Shade	14.99	1	14.99
Storage Bin	15.24	2	24.01
Storage Bin	8.77		
Office Chair	24.99	1	24.99
Desk	39.84	1	39.84
Book Shelf	14.88	1	14.88
End Table	17.99	1	17.99

4X6 Frames	2.50	3	7.50
Poster Frame	11.97	2	23.94
Alphabet Foam Floor Letters	19.50	1	19.50
Storage Containers	1.00	3	3.00
Crafts/Activities for Families			
Tissues	1.00	1	1.00
Fabric for Pillows	5.97 5.00	2 yards 1 yards	16.94
Fleece for Blankets	2.97 2.94 2.94 4.97	2 yards 2 yards 2 yards 2 yards	27.64
Markers	2.47	2	4.94
Canvas	9.47 9.97	2 Medium 2 Large	19.44
Crayons	4.97	1	4.97
Poster Paint	4.97	1	4.97
Chalk	0.48 0.87	1 White 1 Multi Color	1.35
Coloring Book	1.00	5	5.00
Thread	2.16	2	4.32
Art Pad	1.00	2	2.00
Board Games	1.00	3	3.00
Toys/Books	1.00	5	5.00
Pens/Pencils	1.00	4	4.00
Things We Provided*			
Paint Brushes			
Painters Tape			
Wall Paint			
Paint for the Trunk			
Scrapbook Paper			
Cleaner			
Screw Driver			
Light Bulbs			
Cleaner/Cleaning Rags			
Total Cost with Tax			\$681.40

*These items have no charge because we provided them ourselves

Before we could put the room together, we had to search for our supplies. With just seven hundred dollars in funding, we had to really search for the best prices. We ended up buying a cute toy chest at a second-hand store and then used our refurbishing skills to make it fun for the kids. We also were able to buy a new desk, night stand, book shelf, and alphabet foam floor tiles, which we put together. With the rest of the materials that we purchased, we were able to use our

crafting skills to create wall art, pillows, and blankets in order to bring warmth to the room. Below is a summary of what our days looked like during the room renovation.

Renovation

Day One

Our first day at the Salvation Army was our longest day. Before we arrived, we drew on our knowledge of hidden rules and tried to place ourselves in the mindset of what it would be like to be in a situation like the shelter guests, without a home of our own. We wanted to make sure that we were providing an atmosphere that would make them feel comfortable and possibly one that they could replicate in their next home. We brought in all the furniture we had purchased for the room, started painting the chalkboard wall, and put up all the lights and light fixtures. Before we created the chalkboard wall, we contacted the head of our project at the Salvation Army, Major Pat Irvine. When she heard our idea, she welcomed it with enthusiasm and granted us permission to move forward. Creating this wall space at children's eye-level allowed them an interactive area where they could draw and write. While we were there, we also spent time sorting through the existing toys and cleaning them. We replaced the old toy chest with the new one we had bought and refurbished. When we went in to replace the ceiling light fixture, we had to enlist some extra help from friends. This was probably the most challenging part of the room renovation since we had to be careful with hooking up the proper electrical lines and making sure the ground wire was properly placed. After this hurdle, everything fell into place.

Day Two

On the second day, we put the alphabet foam floor together so the children would have a comfortable place to sit and play during their time in the family room. We also brought in some new games and toys to promote family togetherness. Since we supplied a desk for the room, we brought in a new set of pens, pencils, paper for the desk, and chalk for the chalkboard wall. The wall ended up taking us a little longer than we expected because we had to make sure the outline we made with tape was straight and we had to paint a few more coats on the wall than we anticipated. Much time was spent organizing the closet in the room so that everything was easily accessible. The closet already had a metal shelving unit, so we provided plastic bins to put on the shelves for the blankets and the art supplies we had purchased. We moved everything around in the closet so that it was easy to find. All of the toys that were too big for the toy box were on one shelf, and the blankets and craft materials were on another.

Day Three

On the third day, we met with the families at the Salvation Army. We held an event day for the families to come and create artwork in order to make the room feel more like a home. A mother and her three children came to the event. She had one son in second grade and twins who were just entering kindergarten. They were overjoyed with the activities we planned and especially enjoyed the finger painting. We made tie blankets with the kids and also worked on a few arts and crafts projects so that they had something to hang in the room to make it feel more

like home. While engaging with the children and mother, we again applied what we had learned about hidden rules. We realized that what we were doing was more important to them than we expected. The tasks that we were accomplishing seemed small to us because they were normal activities in our lives, but were something special to them. This time with a family provided the “Direct” service learning required for our class, since our other work had been primarily “Indirect.” We also put up the finishing touches in the room by hanging some more artwork that we created on our own time.

When the entire process was completed, we felt a great sense of accomplishment with the finished product. We were able to make the space feel warm, fresh, and welcoming. The new light fixtures added a soft ambiance to the room and the new couch cover and rug gave the room a refreshed look. The chalkboard wall was a huge success with the children, and they really loved playing with it. The children also enjoyed the new art supplies, activity books, and games that we brought in.

From start to finish, we received a lot of positive feedback for the work we did. One day, as we were working on the room, a mother and her children were walking by and one of the children started to cry because they were not allowed to play in the room yet. A couple of days later, as we went back to spend time with the family, the children were finally allowed to come inside the room and play with the games and toys. The kids were smiling from ear to ear and absolutely loved the new room. Seeing their smiling faces and watching them play in the room with so much enthusiasm meant a lot to us. We knew we had accomplished a part of our goal.

About a week after the room was complete, we received an email from Major Pat Irvine, who had overseen our work at the Salvation Army:

It is difficult to find words to express the many ways our shelter families have responded to our revamped family living area. Our objective was to create “home away from home” and that is exactly what your group has accomplished. Shelter guests and staff have commented to me that they feel welcomed and loved because of the many improvements to the family room. I have also noticed that the room is used far more than before because it is so welcoming and warm.

There are not many changes we would make, but if we could start this project over again, we would try to contact more businesses for donations. We spent a lot of time going around for donations, but unfortunately had no luck. We focused on larger companies and talked with local managers. If we had a bit more time, we may have been able to contact the company headquarters and perhaps had a better outcome. If we had worked with smaller businesses that are based in the community, they may have been more interested in our project and possibly given us a faster and more positive response. We probably could have made fliers or posters that advertised our project, which might have led to donations.

We would have enjoyed hearing from other members of the Salvation Army in addition to Major Pat Irvine’s response, but due to confidentiality, direct feedback from Shelter guests was limited. It would have been nice to see how beneficial our work was, how often the room is being used, and if it is being used how we had hoped – to strengthen family interaction. We were pleased with the outcome, and a little surprised we were able to accomplish so much with limited time and limited funds.

Personal Reflection

This experience affected me (Steffi) greatly. It is incredible to stand back after all of the hard work you put into something and know that it made a difference in people's lives. Even though the project was long and time consuming, it was worth it. The day we spent time with families in the room that we created was heartwarming because we got to see the smiles on the mother and children's faces, and watch them play and laugh. I loved seeing our goal of bringing families together become accomplished through this project. Before this experience, I thought that it might be hard to connect with those in poverty, but it was the opposite. Talking with the mother of the family showed me that they are people just like us, who have dreams and goals that they would like to reach. They are working hard every day to provide for their family and make a great life for them. I can honestly say that I would do this project over again in a heartbeat because of the great changes that were made and the lives that were touched.

This experience taught me (Katelyn) a lot about the differences between social classes, hidden rules, and the importance of parent/child interaction for the child's development. This project took a bunch of time outside of class, but when I saw the finished product and how much the kids really loved it, all the time and stress was worth the final product. My part of the work was a lot of coordinating with the Salvation Army to set up meeting times, planning to go out and find our supplies, and then budgeting for all of it. It was a huge responsibility but an extremely rewarding experience.

Through this project, we have learned the importance of family togetherness and the relevance of hidden rules. We also have seen the benefits of service learning in the classroom and we would like to continue using it in the future with our students. We would also like to encourage other teachers to use service learning in their classrooms as well. We would suggest including the students in the grant application process and to let them be a part of deciding what community organization sounds best to them. It is also extremely important to ask the organization what its needs are and to cater the project to those needs. Middle or high school students could complete a large project, such as the room renovation, but they could also do a project as small as making tie blankets or other types of indirect service. The opportunities are truly endless!

Lesson Ideas

Exposure to service learning is important in students' development into well-rounded adults. Below we have listed two lesson ideas to involve students in service learning to further their growth into mature individuals.

Indirect Lesson

In a class such as Child Development, introduce students to different types of family forms. Give them different problems and have them find possible solutions. For example, give them a scenario such as: "You are a single parent of two children. You work three jobs and hardly ever get to see them. How will you make time for your children?" After they brain storm solutions, show a video about families living in shelters and the effects it has on their family. Have students partner up after the video and discuss what their families are like, and then have each student present their partner's family "A Day in the Life of ____." During the next class a

guest speaker from a local organization could tell the class about families and their needs. As a class they could choose items to collect and donate to the organization as part of an indirect service learning activity.

Direct Lesson

In an interior design class, give students a budget and a list of items they need to put in a hypothetical room. Have them plan how to create a space within that budget. A direct service learning project could include students doing something similar to what we have done, contacting a local organization and asking to work with their members to help enhance the facility. They would have to raise funds and find where they are needed, but this would be very rewarding.

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Throughout this process we have grown to appreciate those who work in the community to further the growth of others emotionally and socially. We would like to thank all of the members of the Salvation Army for allowing us to have this opportunity to work in their facility and with their guests. We would also like to thank all of the parties involved with funding to make this project possible, and our other EDCI 350 service-learning group member, Halie Reeves, for all of her contributions to this project. Lastly, we would like to extend our gratitude to our professor, Dr. Wanda Fox, who encouraged and helped us immensely throughout this entire process.

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