

Chapter 10

Learning From and With: An Interdisciplinary Service Learning Course on Autism

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ABSTRACT

Service learning is a pedagogical strategy that allows future professionals to engage with autistic people in meaningful contexts during their initial preparation. In this chapter, the authors present a model service-learning course focused on autism. Undergraduate students, many planning to pursue education, psychology, and allied health careers, learn about autism through multiple lenses while simultaneously interacting with autistic children and youth in community settings. The course effectively transforms students' prior assumptions about autism, supports their preparation for future interdisciplinary careers, and introduces numerous benefits to service partners in the community. Service learning, as exemplified by this model course, is a valuable pedagogical tool for equipping young adults with the knowledge and dispositions to engage with autistic people in both personal and professional contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Given the upward trend in the prevalence of autism over the past 20 years and the current rate of 1 in 36 children diagnosed (Maenner et al., 2023), every person can expect to meet, work with, or befriend an individual with autism,¹ regardless of the professional discipline they pursue. The Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC) has recognized the impact of an increasing population of autistic people and highlighted the need for community services and supports across the lifespan in their 2016-2017

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Strategic Plan. A primary objective, therefore, is supporting the “acceptance, accommodation, inclusion, independence, and integration of people with Autism Spectrum into society” (IACC, 2017, p. xiii). To reach an ideal of full societal inclusion, personnel preparation programs spanning a wide range of disciplines must address issues regarding attitudes of acceptance of individuals with autism.

A primary purpose of interdisciplinary personnel preparation is to ensure future professionals develop up-to-date, authentic, and multifaceted understandings of autism. Undergraduate students who intend to pursue careers in education, allied health professions (e.g., speech and language pathology, occupational therapy), human services, and many other professional fields need to develop a strong knowledge of autism alongside a critical awareness of various disability frameworks and perspectives. Unfortunately, myths and misconceptions have long been associated with autism, often influenced by media and word-of-mouth (Mitchell & Locke, 2015). Adults have voiced overarching misconceptions of autistic individuals including a dislike of physical touch, the presence of special talents, disinterest in social relationships, and association with dangerous behaviors (John et al., 2018). Other research indicates that college students demonstrate misunderstandings of autism including stereotypical characteristics, a lack of genetic basis for autism, and presumed effectiveness of unproven treatments like specialized diets (Tipton & Blacher, 2014).

Because of the persistence of myths and stereotypes among both the general public and the college student population, personnel preparation programs must examine their current efforts to educate future professionals about autism. Innovative initiatives highlighting multiple perspectives and offering direct, personal interaction with autistic people can challenge preconceived notions and prepare students to become more informed, thoughtful, and inclusive professionals. In this chapter, we introduce a model of an interdisciplinary service-learning course focused on autism. *Autism in Our Communities: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* is a three-credit-hour undergraduate elective at a large, public university in the southeastern United States. Although housed in the School of Education, the course is open to students in all majors of study and is taught by instructors representing varied disciplinary backgrounds. The course requires the completion of 30 hours of service learning in addition to class meeting times. This course serves as an exemplar for integrating service-learning experiences with class content emphasizing strengths-based perspectives on autism.

Service Learning in Higher Education

As institutions of higher education increasingly take on roles related to social justice and equity, service learning is one promising form of experiential education that exemplifies an effective and mutually beneficial tool for facilitating undergraduate students’ critical engagement with diverse individuals, including those with autism (Lieberman, 2014). Furthermore, service learning allows students to directly experience some of the many disciplinary roles and professional services relevant to supporting people with autism. The current research on service learning as an effective pedagogical strategy is robust but includes slightly different definitions of the term. Even with these discrepancies, three essential components have coalesced within the recent literature and comprise the definition applied throughout this chapter:

1. Service learning is the active participation of students within a community, engaging in mutually beneficial partnerships with community members;
2. Service learning involves the recognition of strengths and meeting community needs; and

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