Visualizing Critical Thinking: Development of Interpersonal Leadership through Experiential Learning

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1. Introduction/need for innovation or idea

Students enrolled in an interpersonal leadership course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are required to complete a 20-hour service-learning project. The service-learning project, conducted at various off-campus community service agencies, provides students with an opportunity to practice and observe interpersonal behaviors in real-life situations while also positively contributing to the community.

Stedman (2009) argued that leadership classrooms should seek to develop the cognitive capabilities of students by enhancing critical thinking skills; therefore, allowing for a more purposeful and effective reflection process in leadership development. The use of critical thinking skills provides an in-depth and forward thinking reflection process (Rudd, Baker & Hoover, 2000). Facione (1990) referred to critical thinking as "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment, which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations" (p. 2). Huitt (1998) argued that students develop more thorough skills when critical thinking is linked to a specific domain of knowledge and an outcome is pursued. To improve critical thinking and leadership skills while allowing for integration of the service-learning project with classroom concepts, students design and display a poster which integrates the work done at a service project with interpersonal leadership concepts. This specific reflection links an experiential learning project with classroom concepts.

2. How it works/methodology/program phases/steps

This project is completed as a capstone at the conclusion of the service-learning project. The project requires the development of a poster no smaller than 2 feet by 2 feet. Students work in teams of two and select one to two concepts, out of approximately 15 interpersonal leadership concepts taught throughout the course of the semester. The selected topic should be described on the poster in an interesting manner—moving beyond simple definitions. Students are then required to depict the course concept from situations encountered at the service-learning project using imagery, collage or other creative methods and limiting the use of text. Finally, students must demonstrate the impact (positive, negative or neutral) that the application of the concept had at the service learning project site.

3. Results to date/implications

This poster project links an experiential learning activity with classroom concepts that may otherwise seem somewhat abstract to students. The project allows students to concretely describe and depict leadership concepts from experiences or observations in interpersonal interactions. In addition, students are given the opportunity to reflect upon how effectively (or ineffectively) interpersonal leadership concepts are utilized in their experiential learning projects. Producing this creative product provides students with critical thinking capabilities with which to enhance future interpersonal interactions. Examples of student posters will be included to show how critical thinking capacity can be expressed graphically.

4. Future plans/advice to others

This innovative capstone poster project will continue to be utilized to bring together an off campus service learning project with concepts taught in an on-campus classroom. This capstone project may be utilized with similar experiential learning techniques.

5. Costs/resources needed

Students or instructors may incur small expenses of less than $5 per poster to purchase poster board and art supplies. More professionally designed posters can cost upwards of $25.

6. References

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