Community-based learning: humanizing education

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From dropout prevention to civic education, youth service programs often have differing goals. A study of the Community-Based Learning program, a Job Training Partnership Act sponsored dropout prevention effort which focuses on youth service, career exploration, civic education, and academic development, demonstrated that learning in the community can be effective in improving attendance and school grades, as well as helping students to learn. One major contributor to this success is the introduction of adults and college students from the community into the educational process, encouraging more human and personal interaction both on and off campus.

INTRODUCTION

Youth service has many uses in American education. Some institute programs to develop civic consciousness, others teach multi-cultural or inter-generational understanding. Programs emerge as extra-curricular clubs, while others find their way into the mainstream of educational systems. One such integrated program, the Community-Based Learning Program (CBL), was developed with multiple purposes: to infuse community-based learning into the academic program; to keep young people in school who might otherwise drop out; and to introduce youth to the world beyond the campus to develop adult behavior and responsible citizenship. While community service is not the singular goal of the program, many young people participate in community agencies performing service in hospitals, schools, day care centers, and other social institutions as part of their regular academic study. In 1990 two students were selected as Volunteers of the Year by a county committee. Rarely, if ever, had two recipients come from the same program. It is even more significant that the two were selected from a county where the population exceeds seven million. Clearly something extraordinary was happening, especially since most of the students in the program were low-income, inner-city youth who had extremely low grades and histories of poor attendance in public schools.

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A study was conducted on the CBL program to determine which program elements contributed to its apparent success. Students were observed, interviewed, surveyed, and tracked to understand how the program was of benefit. These students were compared with a group enrolled in a more traditional classroom-based program at the school, who performed no community activities as part of their educational experiences. These students were also observed, interviewed, and surveyed. Individual case studies were conducted on three students in the CBL and comparison groups.

SETTING

The educational setting studied was a K-12 magnet school with approximately 500 students located in a large metropolitan area. The focus of the investigation was grades 9–12, with most participants in grades 11 and 12. The Community-Based Learning Program, a special program within the school, is composed of a multi-ethnic population of 60 students, ages 15–19, who are primarily Caucasian, Hispanic, and African–American. Students in the program spend 2 days per week in self-selected field sites exploring occupations or interest areas and learning how basic skills and academic subjects are applied in real world settings. Three days per week are spent on campus doing more traditional school work through individual and small group activities. College tutors from local universities assist with classwork and discuss personal topics. Like their high school counterparts, college students often receive academic credit for their work at the school, coming from such disciplines as education, sociology, and English. Two teachers are responsible for the entire school program, assisted by a Job Developer (supplied by the university) who creates community field sites and monitors student progress at the sites. There is also a community coordinator who assists teachers with curriculum development and organizes and manages the college tutorial component.

Several of the students are enrolled in a local Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program which underwrites some of the CBL effort. Funds for their participation, including additional counseling, support services, and transportation are provided through the program.

Students typically perform service activities as they explore careers and study related subjects in school. Frequently they work in hospitals assisting with patient care, in child care centers supporting professional staff, or in schools providing tutoring or other teaching activities. In other cases, they provide assistance in public service agencies, such as the Girls/Boys Clubs, Red Cross, Girl Scouts, and religious organizations.
METHOD

The original evaluation design called for case studies of four high school programs involving 120 CBL and 120 comparison students at the same schools. However, because of the lateness of approval from the funding agency and the delays from the school district in approving the study, there was only enough time to study one school. The time period covered March (piloting), April, May, and the first week of June. Two ethnographers were hired to conduct the study. Both were familiar with educational programs, although neither had ever worked with a program such as CBL. Meetings were held to discuss the research design and to develop the various instruments and surveys for the study. Once the instruments were developed, they were field tested at the magnet school where the formal study was later conducted. Forms and questions were revised based on student responses, and the final forms were then readied for use in the actual study.

The case study was then conducted at the magnet alternative school. Students were observed and interviewed during the 2.5 months of study. They then completed surveys on their respective programs, which required rank ordering of program components influencing their learning and their interest in school. Data were collected on student absence rates from school records and student grades were obtained from student cumulative folders.

Researchers spent time in the schools 2 days per week, working as tutors and doing participant observations. They interacted with students in roles as both staff and as interviewers, developing strategies to gain rapport with students and information about the program. They led small group learning sessions and had opportunities to interact with students both in the classroom and in the field learning sites.

They worked with school teachers to identify students for individual case studies. It was initially planned to select students having excellent, medium, and poor experiences in both the CBL programs and in the comparison groups. However, teachers in the program had difficulty identifying students in these categories “because everyone’s so different”. Through a process of reviewing students, obtaining teacher feedback, and eliminating those who were unable to obtain parent permission, three students were selected from the CBL program at the magnet school (an African-American male, a Caucasian female, and a Latino male). A similar process occurred with the comparison group, although only one teacher was involved in selection. Students were identified based on teacher perception and student/parent willingness to participate. Three students were chosen: a Caucasian female, an African-American female, and a Latino male.
For each student, data were collected through interviews conducted in school settings and observations made at both school and community locations. In all cases sufficient time was spent to ascertain basic attitudes and opinions.

In addition to the individual case studies, surveys were administered at the end of the program to students in the CBL program and the comparison group. The purpose of the surveys was to determine which program elements were most important and successful for academic learning and school retention.

Interviews were also conducted with teachers in both the CBL and the traditional school program. Interview schedules were developed to corroborate what students said about the programs, in addition to determining what was important from the teacher’s perspective.

DATA ANALYSIS

The intent of the study was to determine the impact of the CBL program on student performance and retention. The data reported here provide information on those areas, as well as indicate the need for additional information based on trends discovered in the study.

Data were collected on student attendance for the year prior to CBL involvement and for the year in CBL for the school studied. Comparison group attendance data were similarly collected for the year prior to the study and for the current academic year. A t-test was conducted comparing mean scores for CBL and comparison groups for both years. In the year prior to CBL there was a significant difference (0.05 level) between CBL and comparison students, with CBL students (mean 36.97) absent more than the comparison group (mean 21.34). By the end of the program year, there was no significant difference between CBL students (mean 30.43) and the comparison group (mean 22.14), although CBL participants still exceeded comparison absences. It should be noted that the difference in the change for CBL students itself was significant, with CBL students declining from 36.97 to 30.42 days absent per year compared to an increase from 21.34 to 22.14 for the other group. This indicates that the CBL program, at this one school, did affect student attendance positively.

Teacher interviews shed some light on reasons why attendance improved. One teacher explained:

“Attendance is not as bad as last year. Jennifer missed about 2 days a week last year, but now she’s here almost all the time. We don’t have a problem with ditching, which you usually have in most classrooms. I don’t know if it’s the program or just how we run things. Most of them really wanna go to their site. Like Joe, he only goes on site days.”
The field site component seemed to motivate students (like Joe) to show interest in some aspect of schooling. This perception is supported by the survey results, which indicated that the field experience was an important factor responsible for keeping students in school.

The other teacher had a different notion of why attendance improved:

“They’re more interested in what happens. This is a more relaxed atmosphere than in other classes. They don’t have a lot of pressure to keep up. I think N and I are nicer than most teachers. We don’t believe in tests. I think N gives them now and then, but I don’t do that very often.”

So besides the field experiences, student interest, teacher attitude, and classroom atmosphere appear to contribute to the success of the program. These variables focus on the “human” environment and suggest that classroom and program climate influence student desire to attend school.

As a gross measure of student learning, student grade averages were monitored before and after the program. In the academic year prior to the program, CBL students had a significantly lower overall yearly grade point average (mean 1.79) than did the comparison group (2.53). Yet, by the end of the year, CBL students achieved a higher GPA (2.50) than the comparison group (2.37). There was a major improvement in school academic performance.

Several reasons were cited by students to explain their improved grades. Not only did students attend school more often, they had also a curriculum which connected them to their service and their community. In addition, as discussed in the next section, they had extra help from tutors and more interaction with adults and peers. Also mentioned was the fact that students had a choice over what they studied.

To gather more information about the effect of various CBL components on student learning and retention, surveys were administered to both CBL and comparison students on aspects of school programs. While the return rate of student surveys was a bit disappointing (only 29 of 58 CBL students and 17 of 28 comparison students), students did identify particular elements of the programs which were helpful in keeping them in school and in assisting them with learning. Of 14 areas identified, rank ordered from most to least important, CBL students listed the field component as having the most influence on school retention. One student indicated that “the field site shows you the connection between school and work. You need to develop the sense of responsibility the field site provides.” Another said “I like my job. To do what it is I do, which is what I want to go into, I need a college degree.” Field experiences seemed to motivate and inspire students to consider either a college education or think how success in school could lead to fulfilling work in the future.
As for program elements which helped with student learning, the one area ranked highest was “help from college tutors”. A student remarked that “tutors help you on anything you need; you can work alone with them”. Another explained that “tutors are basically around your age group; it is a lot easier to relate to them than a lot of teachers. When they teach you, it’s more like a friend learning together than teacher and student”. This notion of “friend” was mentioned frequently in the case studies, indicating that students enjoyed an atmosphere that was friendly and comfortable.

Comparison group students stayed in school because of the social climate and because of their relationships with teachers. They felt “class assignments” helped them to learn best. Student responses included “I think it [class assignments] provides a lot of help because doing class assignments are fun.” In addition, they noted that teacher lectures and homework were instrumental for learning.

CBL students indicated that they liked the smaller, more intimate atmosphere of the program. In fact, one student stated that “this [CBL program] wasn’t a real school,” suggesting that the personal relationships with teachers and tutors, coupled with the supportive atmosphere of the CBL program, eliminated the adversarial relationships so closely associated with traditional school. Another stated that she liked the small size “because you can learn better without too much people around”. The smaller class size and more interactive learning groups captured the interest of students because they felt connected to the program and to each other.

Individual case studies revealed more about the school programs. CBL students discussed the value of field sites as places to explore careers, to feel more responsible and grown up, and to have personal contact with adults. What seemed to matter for the students was the opportunity to be involved in their learning programs, to have choices about what they would study and where they could learn. Students valued the options given to them by the program, as well as the opportunity to set their own pace of learning.

For one CBL student, Alice, there was a lot of learning taking place. According to her teachers, she learned responsibility and self esteem, and also learned about retail business and about nutrition. Additionally, she learned that while she may still want to be a real estate broker, she may not necessarily desire to work in a real estate office. “Most importantly, she enjoyed her experience, and this may have changed her life.” Whether learned through business or service experiences, students’ attitudinal changes were important to the success of the program.
"When Alice talked about her CBL program she mentioned how grades had changed. She said: ‘They’ve improved a lot. They go up and down over the 5 week period, but they are much better overall. I went from straight fails to Cs and Ds last year, and now I’m getting As and Bs and Cs. I’m getting normal grades now’.

Alice attributed her grade improvement to her new attitude. ‘I like school now,’ she said, ‘from kindergarten to the 9th grade I never liked any class or school. So I decided that if I didn’t like school I wouldn’t go. From the 7th grade on I ditched all the time. If I don’t like something I won’t do it. Maybe that’s not right, but that is how I am. I screwed up a lot. I faked report cards. My friend came here (magnet school) and said she actually liked school. I couldn’t believe it. It was weird. I always hated school—I never wanted to get up in the morning. Now I like school. I know how it is important and I go. The teachers here are open. They help you get things done. They don’t just explain, they do it with you, and it helps.’"

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*Significant at 0.05 level.
Attitudes were influenced by many factors. The two mentioned here, teacher openness and teacher involvement, were important contributors to Alice’s change. Both actions were enhanced by the class format, where half the students were in the community every day except Friday, thus allowing the smaller ratios of students to adults.

Comparison student case studies indicated a greater acquiescence to the educational system. They liked the student–teacher interactions, thought school was not supposed to be too exciting, and were supported by friends in the social environment of the school. One interview summarized the best parts of being in school: “to be with friends and learn new things. That’s basically it”.

Observations of the students in class revealed that there was not much interaction between these students and the teachers (unlike the CBL students) and that the predominant work in the class was seatwork or class discussions where the teacher did most of the talking. There were no sources of additional help in the classrooms, such as tutors, so students had to rely more on their own efforts or brief encounters with the teachers. This frustrated some of the students interviewed, but they accepted it as just part of the school experience.

The brief investigation of the comparison students and the more traditional classroom-based program reinforced findings from the Coleman study in the 1970s (Coleman, J. S. ed. 1974), which revealed that students were primarily interested in the social life of school, and only secondarily concerned with the academic agenda of the institution. Students talked about how much they enjoyed their interaction with friends and that school provided social opportunities to be together.

DISCUSSION

In her study of drop-out prevention programs, Margaret Orr (1987) emphasized the need to examine multi-dimensional programs addressing the problems of potential dropouts. The CBL program studied here is just such a program, with individualized instruction, small group work, student-initiated learning activities (including community-based service-learning activities), extra counseling services, college tutor/mentors, small program size, and involved teachers. Quantitative data revealed that the CBL program did have a significant effect on grades and attendance, two traditional measures of student success in school and two indicators of continued persistence in education. Both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that certain program components were considered important to retention and learning in school.
Based on case studies and surveys, students indicated that the field experiences and the college tutors were the most important components of the program. The reasons mentioned for valuing these components included personal attention, personal choice of activities, development of personal relationships, exposure to adult environments and adult responsibility, and the creation of a program that “didn’t seem like school”. Students appreciated the opportunity to have dialogue with adults about school, about life in general, and about personal issues. The CBL program differed from the traditional one because it included many more adults in the educational process, both in the classroom and in the field. Students had opportunities to discuss their schoolwork with people who were “closer to their own age” and with people who could demonstrate a personal interest in their education and in their lives.

Students saw the field experiences as motivational. Not only was the daily routine of school altered by the CBL schedule, students had a chance to connect their future goals with their current education. For many it was a chance to assist the community through service-learning activities and was also viewed as an opportunity to explore career options and to combine career interests with traditional academic courses such as English, Math, and Social Studies. While the connections were not always easily or effectively made, students perceived that there was a relationship between what they did in school and what they did in the community. Students also indicated that the field experiences were a good source of learning. Exactly what they learned should be the subject of follow-up studies.

There appeared to be quite a contrast between the CBL program and the traditional program when it came to student–adult interaction. Researchers indicated that in traditional classes the teachers did not have much interaction with students. Teachers remained separate from the students, often working at their desk, while students did seat work or listened quietly to lectures. However, in the CBL program, students were observed working much more in small groups led by teachers and tutors. Often the student–adult ratio was four or five to one. This never occurred in the traditional classroom. At the field sites the ratios were even smaller—students literally worked one on one with adults, and in some cases, the number of adults exceeded that of students. Thus, the CBL program offered many more opportunities for students and adults to interact on a personal basis.

The emphasis on personal relations was reinforced through students' perception of the importance of program size. While survey data indicated that program size had little influence on motivating students to stay in school, it was perceived as important in helping students to learn. On the
learning dimension, students ranked “program size” fifth out of the 14 items, indicating that such size was important in allowing for personal contact between students and teachers. Comments about the size of the CBL program ranged from being “noticed” (in regular programs you are not noticed) to being “small and the tutors have more time for you”. Size was equated with learning: the more opportunity for adult-student interaction, the greater the chance for learning to occur.

CONCLUSION

What mattered to students, according to this study, were personal relationships between students and adults—both in the CBL program and in the comparison group. CBL students were able to establish relationships with teachers, college tutors, and field sponsors because of the smaller classroom ratios and the individual attention provided by the tutors and the sponsors. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the CBL program was the infusion of additional adult role models into the educational process, something not available in the more traditional system. Even the comparison students praised the social environment and their relationships with teachers as being the most meaningful elements of their educational program. This suggests that it is perhaps the human factor that plays heavily on student engagement, retention, and success in educational programs. It certainly seems plausible that students need to enjoy their school work and feel challenged by what they do, but it also is important (at this school) that students feel connected with other human beings in the educational system.

The trends in the data, both from quantitative and qualitative sources, indicate that there are important elements of service and drop-out prevention programs which bear further study. The role of the field experience and the tutor need to be examined more closely to determine just how they keep students in school and how they function to improve student learning. This initial evaluation suggests that where students identify field experiences and tutors as important elements in the educational system, there is improved attendance and improved grades. Further study is needed to determine what causes this improvement, and, indeed, whether community-based learning programs can consistently achieve student outcomes similar to those identified in this study.

In addition, further investigation needs to be conducted in varied settings. Because only one school supplied data for this investigation, there needs to be an examination on of CBL-type programs in several different environments—continuation schools, comprehensive high schools, magnet
schools, vocational schools—to focus in on what elements of CBL are effective in these settings.

The results of this brief study support findings from previous investigations. Studies of schooling (Goodlad, 1984) and youths who traditionally do not do well in school (W.T. Grant Commission, 1988; Weiss and Hugh, 1989) indicate the need for community involvement and personalized learning experiences. Young people want opportunities to interact with people beyond the school walls, need to receive regular feedback from adult figures about their learning and their lives, desire learning environments which are comfortable and supportive, and seek connection of schooling with the fabric of their lives. Simply put, young people seek learning environments which support dynamic human activity.

The CBL program studied here provides an environment which supports personal interactions. The addition of more adult figures in the educational system through community teachers and college tutors helps students feel connected to other people and assists in providing more consistent feedback on learning. Although we could not distinguish between purely service-related and career-related activities, it is clear that community connections (both people and experiences) have a positive affect on school success. This study indicates that those people and the experiences they provide have an important and positive influence on young people as they grow and mature into adulthood.

REFERENCES


