

Challenging Your Assumptions

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Applied learning as a pedagogical technique has taken higher education by storm, and psychology is no exception. Applied learning programs are credit-bearing student-learning experiences that occur outside of the classroom, such as internships/practica, service-learning, independent research projects, and study away from campus. Effective applied learning experiences ground students' understanding of psychological concepts in real-world experience. On our campus, this pedagogy has made its way into our strategic plan, and having observed the number of presentations and posters devoted to these teaching tools at teaching conferences, we have reason to believe we are not alone.

This type of off-campus student activity in internships, service, and research is exciting, but comes with additional risk. Consider some of the consequences of applied learning that classrooms (by their very nature) usually provide protection from:

University students could be injured or otherwise harmed en route to or at their applied learning site.

University students might inadvertently attempt to engage in therapeutic intervention or otherwise overstep ethical boundaries.

Site supervisors or service recipients may have misconceptions about what kind of service psychology undergraduates can deliver.

If you think this list is an over-reaction, consider the following case. LeBlanc (2003) cited the Florida Supreme Court decision (No. SC94079) as a case involving the robbery and sexual assault of a graduate student in the parking lot of an agency where she was interning. The student sued the university, alleging that the university knew there had been prior attacks in the same lot and therefore should have informed her of these in advance of her accepting the placement. The trial court rejected the lawsuit, holding that the university did not have a responsibility to inform an adult, and that the failure of the university to warn her did not cause the injuries. This decision was overturned at the appeals court level and the Florida Supreme Court upheld the decision of the appeals court.

This decision suggests that regardless of whether a university places students abroad or across the street for applied learning experiences, the university may have responsibilities toward the student, which do not usually apply when the student attends class on campus. As such, undergraduate applied learning experiences should incorporate a systematic risk assessment process.

CYA usually calls to mind covering one's backside, but we have found it more helpful to consider an alternative: Challenging Your Assumptions. The former, and traditional interpretation of CYA promotes reactivity. Rather than reactively protecting oneself as the traditional interpretation of the acronym implies, thinking in terms of challenging one's assumptions provides a more rational, proactive way of managing risk in applied learning. This should improve the mood of your risk manager (the one person on your campus who is NOT happy about applied learning!).

Push the Circles Together!

We use Venn diagrams to promote rational analysis of risk. In the figure below, one circle contains the learning objectives. It defines what psychological concepts we aim for our students to understand and apply. The other circle contains the nature of the on-site activity for the applied learning experience. It describes the tasks the students will perform.

When we design an applied learning experience, we ponder the relationship between our learning objectives and the on-site activity. What will students learn on-site that they cannot learn in a classroom? How does that connect to the learning objectives? What knowledge are they going to apply for the on-site partner that they couldn't apply in a classroom setting? Sometimes, we find ourselves able to answer these questions clearly. In that case, our circles in the Venn diagram push close together. This means that the risk incurred by using an applied learning pedagogy is worth it — justified, at least in part, by the learning potential the real-world leverages. In some situations, we find harder to articulate such answers. We argue that when you cannot answer these questions, the overlapping space in the circles is too small, and you probably have more risk than you may want.

In some ways, psychology carries more risk when using applied learning than other scientific fields. Because graduate training in clinical psychology requires internships, models of supervision have been established for many years (Dye & Borders, 1990; Majcher & Daniluk, 2009). Yet those models provide little guidance about managing risk in undergraduate experiences. For example, it is quite possible that the community partner in a service-learning experience “expects” one thing of a psychology undergraduate that the student cannot ethically deliver.

However, when that student is on-site, away from a faculty member's watchful eye, social psychology has demonstrated how situational demands might incite that student to attempt to perform duties beyond the scope of their abilities (e.g., Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973; Milgram, 1963). If such experimental situations can elicit cooperation from participants, imagine how a service site might influence an undergraduate. Students on service sites are eager to do well and often hope to build a contact that might become a job prospect. If the community partner asks the student to perform beyond the scope of their training, the student may be so eager to meet their request that they fail to carefully consider boundaries. This problem could be particularly sticky for *licensed* psychologists (whose license might be sanctioned) but is relevant for any psychologist or chairperson who might be held accountable for student behavior in community settings.

We propose a set of 10 tips to help faculty who find themselves in the position of directing undergraduate applied learning. Although there are exceptions to these guidelines, in general they are helpful in developing and teaching undergraduate applied learning.

Challenging Your Assumptions

Should applied learning be required or elective? Many universities emphasize the opportunity of applied learning, which appeals to the millennial student. Some even go so far as to “require” it. The knee-jerk reaction here is, “If this approach is so great, of course all students should do it! It promotes town/gown relations, it’s good PR, and heck, we might even get a Carnegie designation for community engagement!” But, are all of your students ready to be good representatives? The advantage of not requiring applied learning experiences of all students is that you can screen out any students who might not be ready, via an application process. An added bonus is that students who are required to go through an application process tend to value the experience more (think effort justification!).

Tip 1: In general, applied learning should be elective, not required, in undergraduate psychology curriculum.

Tip 2: In general, faculty should use an application process to select students to participate in applied learning.

Should psychology departments maintain a list of partners for applied learning experiences, or should students generate their own sites? The response we see most often to this question is usually, “Why not maintain a list? It’s more convenient for students. It preserves the relationship with the community partner. Of course we should maintain a list!” But the Florida case cited above illustrates that maintaining a list implies some sort of responsibility for assuring the safety of the site. A lot of work is needed to maintain a list of possible sites. If the list is to be valuable to students, it should be long enough to create a sense of choice. Most departments cannot devote the time required to maintain a lengthy list of sites. In addition, students choosing sites from a list miss networking opportunities. Looking for, finding, and seeking approval for a site are all valuable skills for students who will eventually enter the job market.

Tip 3: Student-generated sites, in general, are preferable to sites chosen from a department-maintained list.

Should psychology departments do background checks on students wishing to engage in applied learning? Departments may be quick to say “Yes, why not? It shows we’re being careful and concerned, and it will mitigate our risk, right?” What exactly should one look for in a background check? What would exclude students from the applied learning experience? Of course, one wants to avoid a person with a prior sexual offense on their record from being in charge of mentoring small children. However, not all applied learning involves children, and not all cases are as black and white. Background checks reveal a wide range of information. Is the information gained in a background check essential to know for predicting performance on the site? If the student fails the background check, what is your alternate plan? The problem with this is that asking for a background check without a specific reason creates an invasion of privacy for the student. Then risk is incurred again, albeit a different kind of risk. Different sites have different reasons for exclusion. Because of this varied need for information across sites, it is better for the site to run the check if they consider it necessary. In this way, the university avoids invasion of privacy, and the background check can still occur when needed.

Tip 4: Rather than conducting background checks on all students who participate in applied learning,

allow sites/community partners to determine when that is necessary and conduct the check themselves.

Do psychology departments and/or faculty need special insurance coverage for applied learning? Often faculty have the expectation that any activity they do as a faculty member is covered by the university's liability agreement, "Hey, they want students to have applied learning experiences. Of course they have the right insurance coverage for this activity, right?" We argue that this sort of assumption is not a good way to proactively manage risk associated with applied learning. Look at all the ways insurance coverage might be valuable: students could be injured en route to or from the site, students might be injured on site, students might actually do harm on the site to the point the community partner may take legal action against the university, and so on.

Rather than reacting to a stressful situation, why not plan ahead? Talk to your risk manager. Find out what is and is not covered. Depending on your coverage, students may need to purchase additional insurance for the activity (just like they would purchase a book for a traditional class). Plan and prepare for contingencies so that you know how you will remove students from unsafe locations. Be aware of the security situation at your applied learning sites and talk to students about how to handle these contingencies. Better to be prepared than to figure this out on the fly. Preparation helps mitigate the risk if something does go wrong.

Tip 5: Know your institutional insurance policy — what it covers and what it does not. If it does not cover student activity off campus, consider asking students to purchase liability insurance for the experience.

Tip 6: Have a plan for removing students from situations that become dangerous. For study abroad, trip insurance may cover associated costs.

What are the risks to the community members we partner with in applied learning? Universities are quick to highlight the benefits of the partnership, "The partner gets high quality educated labor for relatively low price while the student gets experience. It's a win-win situation!" Nearly everything in life has tradeoffs. Although we do not dispute that there are "upsides" to applied learning for both the student and the partner, pretending there aren't any "downsides" is just asking for trouble. Potential risks to the partner include the possibility that students may be all too willing to exceed the boundaries of their own competence, to the detriment of the partner. If the partner is not clearly aware of those boundaries, they may inadvertently expect too much from the students.

We find it helpful to have a series of meetings with partners (this is part of the "maintenance" we referred to above) who want to host student applied learning experiences. At the first meeting, talk about expectations of the partner and the student. The faculty member insures that appropriate learning objectives are accepted by student and partner. Based on the first meeting, the student drafts a statement of goals and objectives for the applied learning experience that outlines the learning objectives and how those translate into goals on site. The partner then reacts to and edits the document, with all parties signing approval. This process also mitigates the risk that faculty might incur in what is often perceived as a subjective grading process. When all parties have agreed to a set of on-site goals that meet learning objectives, faculty have a more objective basis for assigning grades.

Tip 7: Require the student to develop, in concert with community partner and professor, a list of goals

and objectives, along with a description of the means by which those will be achieved. Require the student, community partner, and professor to have signed copies of this document.

Does the field of psychology have special risks? Within the university, we focus on the scientific training psychology departments are known for (“What risk could there be? It’s just a liberal arts and science degree...they are not training clinicians!”). This may be the view inside the ivory tower, but that is not necessarily the public perception of psychology. Psychologists, especially licensed ones, need to choose their labels carefully when they oversee undergraduate applied learning. Licensure is covered under administrative, not criminal or civil, law. Administrative law tends to be predicated upon “guilty until proven innocent” (Williams, 2001). We distinguish between the notions of “supervision” and “direction.” Historically, supervision refers to clinical training (Harrar, VandeCreek, & Knapp, 1990), and implies that the supervisor has 100% responsibility for the supervisee. For most faculty who teach applied learning, direction would be a more appropriate term.

Tip 8: Refer to faculty’s role as “directing” rather than “supervising” in all course materials.

Can assessment mitigate risk in applied learning? Assessment generally focuses on documenting the quality of process and outcomes to satisfy an accrediting body or group of constituents. But assessment is critical to knowing when the risk that accompanies applied learning is justified. Best practices in applied learning point to certain features that must be present for learning to occur. They include application, reflection, diversity, and placement quality (Eyler & Giles, 1999). To the extent that any one of those features is of low quality, it suggests to the faculty member that (a) the student was not sure what material to apply on site, (b) the student did not spend much time critically reflecting on their activity, (c) the student did not gain much exposure to people or viewpoints beyond what they would have had in the classroom, or (d) the site itself did not focus on engaging the student in significant work. Assessing these factors independently may help faculty diagnose as well as improve weak points in the applied learning experiences they direct. When the quality of one of these is low and cannot be effectively improved, then is the risk of engaging students in applied learning justified?

Tip 9: Know exactly what content you expect your students to apply, how you will facilitate critical reflection on it, and what new perspectives the experience brings. Be sure to assess each of these features, along with placement quality, every semester.

Tip 10: When assessment consistently fails to support high quality application, reflection, diversity, and placement quality, consider a more traditional teaching approach.

Conclusion

Today, instructors of psychology are likely to be involved in directing applied learning experiences, a good thing for both faculty and students. However, it is important to use applied learning only when the risk is justified. It is easy to jump on the bandwagon and try to implement applied learning techniques everywhere. Pause, challenge your assumptions, and think about risk more proactively so that you and your students reap the benefits of applied learning rather than the losses associated with reactive risk management.

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