

'In The Real World': Lapsit - An Experiential Learning Project With Early Childhood Education Students

Ms Alexandra Diamond; Mr Jeff Meiners

School of Education, University of South Australia

alexandra.diamond@unisa.edu.au; jeff.meiners@unisa.edu.au

Abstract

Over four years, final year cohorts of University of South Australia (UniSA) Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (ECE) students undertook community experience by working directly with parents/ carers and young children in a leadership action project. This project was titled 'Lapsit' as it focused on children sitting on their parents' laps to share picture books. It was located outside the usual professional experience in traditional educational settings and can be categorised as 'service learning'. Aiming to address low literacy levels in northern Adelaide, a region of recognised educational disadvantage, this unique experiential learning project provided pre-service teachers with a meaningful bridge to their future leadership roles as early childhood professionals. Linking on-campus engagement with theory and practical experience, students built upon their body of knowledge and developed skills through team work, and liaison with professionals and volunteers from a range of organisations. The project involved planning, evaluation, collaborative leadership and mentorship, with critical reflection on roles and responsibilities.

The paper includes information about the Lapsit leadership action project, the mutual benefits arising from the project for the ECE students and project partners, and methods for assessing the students' service learning experience. To illustrate students' experiential learning and give voice to their insights, the paper includes quotes from their critical reflective writing and data from various evaluations. The extracts are used with consent from individual students (with pseudonyms).

The benefits of this service learning project to UniSA's early childhood program and to the development of scholarly work for staff are also considered. Lapsit has received positive acclaim from students and wider recognition with awards for achievement.

1. INTRODUCTION

With a key theme 'Experience. The difference', UniSA aspires to use experiential learning to provide the graduates needed by industry and the community. From 2006 to 2009, cohorts of between 83 and 102, ECE students participated in Lapsit. Kolb's experiential learning theory proposes that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" [1]. As part of the field of experiential learning, 'professional experience' is one type of 'practice-based learning' [2].

Practice-based learning is a term used to describe experience which aims to engage students in authentic workplace contexts. Practice-based learning includes 'professional experience' or 'practicum' as a well-established core component of pre-service teaching degrees, and provides opportunities for student teachers to develop workplace skills, relate theory to practice, and form teacher identities [3]. Within the ECE program at UniSA, such experience is gained in educational sites such as childcare centres, preschools and schools, and contributes to final accreditation with the South Australian Teacher Registration Board. To support graduates' success in work, key aims of practice-based learning at UniSA include the development of career management skills, the application of knowledge to solve workplace-relevant problems in ethical ways and the ability to communicate with diverse audiences about their discipline [2].

As well as providing a teaching qualification, an ECE degree potentially enables graduates to work with young children and their families in libraries, community and health settings, social work and child protection organisations, and the arts. ECE graduates therefore require a wide skill set, including experience with cross-agency work and the ability to engage with a range of community contexts. Lapsit was seen by university staff as a positive way of supporting student teachers' interest in working in broader community partnerships. The partners involved in Lapsit viewed it as an ideal opportunity for communities to benefit from the application of final year student teachers' body of knowledge and skills, and for student teachers to undertake authentic community engagement.

The Lapsit project was experienced by the pre-service student teachers as a leadership action project within their final year studies and they worked directly with local library services, various early childhood site providers, parents/ carers and young children. These features of the Lapsit project highlight a further component of experiential learning identified as 'service learning' [4]. Service learning can be described as "A credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflects on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader

appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" [5].

2. WHAT IS Lapsit?

Lapsit is a facilitated emergent language and literacy development program of twenty minute group sessions for parents and very young children in northern Adelaide. The project was named 'Lapsit' as it involved young children sitting on their parents' laps to share picture books. Initial funding by a 2005 Australian Government Sustainable Regions grant to the Cities of Salisbury (CoS) and Playford (CoP) public library services supported the production of fifty purpose-designed literacy resource kits to address low literacy levels. These kits are themed and include stories, rhymes, songs, finger plays and puppets. The library services approached UniSA for support in implementing their Lapsit vision. This led to an innovative collaboration between the library services, UniSA and early childhood community sites. From 2006 to 2009 UniSA early childhood education students have used the kits to assist in leading the planning and facilitation of fun sessions for groups of parents/ carers and their young children. Each year student teachers worked in small teams with approximately 180 families in 19 to 33 Lapsit program sites.

The Lapsit sites were mainly playgroups for parents, carers and children from birth to school age. With activities set up and run by volunteer parents and carers, playgroups usually meet on a weekly basis for one to two hours [6]. The playgroups were often linked to Department of Education and Children's Services' preschools, but sites were also run by a range of other providers such as Anglicare, Child, Youth and Women's Health Services, and neighbourhood houses which function as local community centres.

The student teams were required to initially liaise by phone with their site leaders, make an introductory visit to meet parents and children, and explain the project and their role. The teams then negotiated with site staff, parents and volunteers to implement the project, taking account of their competing university requirements over a designated period of time. In the following weeks the students planned and implemented the Lapsit sessions to meet the needs of the attending children and parents/carers. Students' roles also included informing parents and site staff about local library services, the university program and other education resources, and encouraging individuals/ families to access them.

The project combined service and learning in the community with clear intentions for all the partners. Lapsit required the establishment of a relationship based on mutuality, in which both students and the community gained benefit. Students were thus involved in learning activities with a 'public good' dimension that contributed to UniSA's equity mission [4]. From its inception in 2006, academic staff and final year student teachers in the ECE program in the School of

Education at UniSA supported the development, implementation and evaluation for the Lapsit program in partnership with the libraries services. An important partner in this project was UniSA Northern Adelaide Partnerships (UNAP) which provided vital ongoing support throughout the four years. UNAP “aims to facilitate collaborative partnerships between the University and the community to carry out projects that will help to promote social inclusion” [7].

Further documentation about the Lapsit project’s establishment, history and underpinning partnerships can be accessed in various articles [8], [9], [10].

3. DEVELOPING SERVICE LEARNING WITHIN A COURSE

This experiential learning project was developed as part of a course: Administration, Management, Leadership and Change in Children’s Services 0-8 which aimed to “extend students’ insight into the contexts and nature of management and administration”. Topics included “the role of the professional”; “the nature of leadership and the implications for change”; “the legal responsibilities and relevant regulations governing management and administration in the early childhood field”; and “the need to maintain and evaluate your own professional effectiveness” [11]. The course was originally delivered as a conventional on-campus lecture and tutorial series.

Due to student feedback in 2003 from the Course Evaluation Instrument, staff decided to develop a community-focused, service learning experience to act as a vehicle to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. Clarity about the requirements of the service learning component of the course was provided via the Course Information Booklet. This included a timetable, project briefing and expectations of time commitment to the course, with timings for the off-campus field work explained. The weekly on-campus lecture series with a combination of university lecturers and guest speakers from the community was linked to a reduced series of two hour tutorials to accommodate the 5-6 week service learning project. Library services staff members were involved from the first week of the course to support contextual and administrative aspects of the Lapsit project.

From the start of the course, university teaching staff guided the final year students to reflect upon their knowledge and experience from courses undertaken during the prior three years, and were referred to readings about the reflective process [11]. Requirements for reflective writing were built into course assessments. Students were advised that “your writing will be assessed on the basis of the critical and reflective nature of your thinking and the ways in which you articulate your ‘professional self’. Your ideas and opinions will be treated with respect, and the content of your paper will be treated with confidentiality” [11]. Because requirements for

reflective writing are introduced to ECE students at UniSA in their first year, final year students are accustomed to the processes involved. To meet the needs of the parents, children, volunteers and other team members in the Lapsit contexts, students reflected on aspects of prior professional experience in child care centres, preschools and schools, and considered the potential application of this experience in this new context. Before embarking on the project, students worked together during on-campus sessions to identify team goals for their service learning experience. The development of a succinct personal teaching credo was another key aspect of critical reflective writing in the first stages of the course.

4. COMPONENTS OF SERVICE LEARNING

McCarthy [12] suggests that knowledge, experience and reflection are three interdependent components of service learning. Drawing on their early childhood philosophy, body of knowledge (including child development and curriculum understanding such as play, literacy and the arts) and practicum experience, student teachers encouraged the development of parents’ understanding of the importance of sharing books with babies and young children, and shared useful strategies such as using songs and rhymes to support emergent literacy. Student feedback highlighted the benefits of applying their body of knowledge in real life work contexts. They found they needed to be able to articulate their early childhood education practices because participation involved negotiation with key stakeholders and problem-solving to meet community requirements. A student reported:

“I was able to successfully support Doris (mentee), communicate effectively with everyone involved and demonstrate problem solving skills. I really enjoy working in a team situation because of the opportunities to learn from a range of people, hear other ideas and solve problems collaboratively” (Jessica, Critical Reflection).

In tutorial workshops, students considered the importance of team-based leadership, and used a personal strengths inventory and a team roles questionnaire to foster self-awareness and reflect on “how to be strategic and achieve individual and group rewards” [13]. One student wrote:

“From the Lapsit program I extended my experience and knowledge of the teaching-leadership relationship, the impact of effective leadership, and the crucial role it plays in producing positive and successful outcomes and the achievement of goals in a disadvantaged community” (Kelly, Critical reflection).

Critical reflection on their roles and responsibilities as early childhood pre-service professionals, who would be regarded as leaders in the field, was a crucial part of the course. At certain points during the semester, students were provided with structured time to reflect upon their service experience by thinking, discussing and writing. These on-campus sessions also included

role-play of simulated scenarios that could be faced, such as parent-teacher meetings, interviews and other challenging professional situations. Topics included reflective listening, conflict resolution, managing stress and networking. A student wrote:

“Our management skills allowed us to provide a Lapsit session,... to communicate with the families and spend time mentoring and supporting them. I learnt that possessing good management skills is crucial to the success of a project like Lapsit.... Utilising and refining my management skills has extended my ability to manage different situations.” (Sally, Critical Reflection)

Students were expected to autonomously resolve any problems arising during the implementation of their projects [11]. However they were supported in this process through tutorial discussions, team meetings with university staff, and reference to reading on problem-based learning [14].

5. ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE LEARNING AS PART OF A COURSE

Each year, final course assessment was linked to the Lapsit service learning project. This assessment included two components. Students were required to collate information from the field work in the community, analyse their project as a team and prepare a fifteen to twenty minute presentation. The presentation reported on the team’s Lapsit work to an audience of potential future colleagues, namely fellow students, UniSA staff and invited guests from the field. The presentations described the context of the project their team undertook, identified the successes and challenges encountered, and made recommendations for the future development of the project. The presentation required students to include reference to discussions with people they had met in the project (early childhood leaders and members of the community) and identify key issues regarding administration, management, leadership and change encountered when working on the project. This provided the first part of the final assessment.

For the second part, each student provided a written personal critical reflection using essay format. This focused upon issues encountered, as well as the student’s learning related to the project. Assignment guidance encouraged students to focus on selected topics from the presented lectures and course readings in relation to students’ experiential learning (eg. administration responsibilities, teamwork, managing change, mentorship, ethics and working with families). In addition, students were encouraged to follow up by reflecting critically on their own team style, leadership within the team, and the impact of other team members’ team styles on their own and their team’s functioning. A student wrote:

“In reflecting on my experiences I can see how I have grown as a professional and the areas in which I still need to develop.” (Kelly, Critical Reflection).

Such reflection upon discipline knowledge is identified as a key feature of service learning experience [4]. Rodd [15] commented that ECE students need to critically reflect on what it means to be a professional in preparation for employment. In relation to this one student stated that:

“The project allowed us to move into the context as professionals.... It brought to the forefront one of the graduate qualities that we have been striving to develop throughout the degree, that being ‘communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community’ (UniSA, 2006)” (Emma, Critical reflection).

Students were given credit for their learning outcomes within their service learning experience, rather than being rewarded for the number of service hours. Such credit included a high quality ‘certificate of participation’ which included the UniSA and Library Services logos, outlined the roles and responsibilities undertaken by the student and signed by the course coordinator and library project managers. Students use their certificates to support job applications and anecdotal evidence suggests that employers are impressed with ECE graduates’ service learning experiences in the community. In addition, the library service provided a celebratory lunch with speeches, an important aspect of successful project work, essential for building collegiality and a clear sign of appreciation conveyed to students.

6. THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

Indicators of service learning provided by UniSA [4] include the development of students’ personal attributes. Along with the development of skills and knowledge, students cultivated qualities such as empathy, awareness of their personal values and beliefs, self-esteem, self-confidence, social-responsibility, and a sense of caring for others. Evidence of such learning is shown by the following quotes from students’ critical reflections:

“Empathy, motivation and social skills were the key instruments in our eventual success because implementing a successful program in a community very different from (one’s) own requires competent skills in all three areas (Goleman 2000)” (Kelly, Critical Reflection).

“I am now realizing that within the broader community I can help to bring about change to enhance the lives of others” (Amy, Critical Reflection).

“Working in a team meant I had to manage myself individually within the team” (Sally, Critical Reflection).

“I really appreciated the opportunity to work with the parents as well as the children. I can be quite shy and ...forming relationships with parents has been something that I have struggled with on my teaching practicums and in my work at a childcare centre. I really wanted to make the most of this opportunity, so I decided to step out of my comfort zone and tried to be more confident in talking to parents. I found that through this experience I really grew in my ability to form relationships with parents” (Kristy, Critical Reflection).

“As part of LapSit (sic), I have not only practised time management skills but also learned how to deal with stress” (Lauren, Critical reflection).

For a similar literacy project in the USA, Wasserman notes: “Results document that incorporating service-learning into a well developed literacy course dramatically increased the self-efficacy of the participants by the conclusion of the course” [16]. In the UniSA course, many students wrote of their increased confidence as a result of the Lapsit project. One student wrote:

“Before carrying out the Lapsit project ...I did not feel that I was the ‘leader’ type. I preferred to work quietly behind the scenes, not drawing attention to myself. ...however I have come to realize that I do in fact have leadership skills, and I am more confident at speaking out and ‘putting myself out there’ than I realized” (Allysa, Critical Reflection).

7. MUTUAL BENEFITS OF SERVICE LEARNING

Another indicator of service learning focuses on “a reciprocal relationship in which the service reinforces and strengthens the learning, and the learning reinforces and strengthens the service” [4]. Bernie McSwain, the Manager of the City of Salisbury Library Services verified that services were strengthened by the students’ involvement in the Lapsit project when she wrote in her supporting statement for the UniSA Chancellor’s Award application: “The role played by the University of SA Bachelor of the Early Childhood students has ensured this program has been professionally implemented in our communities and well received by the community.”

Student teachers thought the project provided opportunities to improve their engagement with ECE issues as managers of change in the community:

“One of the most valuable aspects that I have taken from the Lapsit project is that successful change does not and cannot happen overnight. Changing the values and beliefs of a community, small or large, and their perceptions of literacy (for example), is a difficult and continuing process. The Lapsit project was the first stage of the process. Introducing parents and children to the joys of reading books and singing songs was the first valuable step toward lifelong literacy learning” (Sophie, Critical reflection).

The informal nature and attendance patterns of the playgroup environments provided a challenge to final year students now familiar with experiencing the more formal requirements of registered childcare sites, preschools and schools. One student stated:

“The project allowed the teams to work in a ‘real world’ situation that is quite different from the...practicum experiences that have been completed” (Emma, Critical Reflection).

The students’ critical reflections indicated many other positive outcomes. Students reported their need to work effectively in teams and build personal resources for working in community settings. For example one student wrote:

“I... now have an understanding of how important it is to be aware of the context and community that you are working in so that you are aware of their needs and the challenges they face” (Kendra, Critical Reflection).

And:

“Listening to and learning from families is important to build upon their strengths (Early Childhood Australia 2006). The Lapsit project provided the opportunity to do this” (Eleanor, Critical Reflection).

Over the four years, students drew upon their experiences to provide formative feedback to the library services. In 2006 student teachers evaluated the pilot project and resource kits, reported on parent and site staff feedback, identified issues encountered, and made recommendations to enhance Lapsit. Recommendations were included in the assessed presentations and utilised for the summative evaluation report to the funding body.

In 2007 a new mentoring model was implemented as a dimension of the leadership project. The course presented ‘mentoring’ as a contested yet commonly used term in many professional contexts. Student teachers mentored volunteers (recruited by the site staff) to take over running Lapsit sessions and to ensure sustainability. Volunteers observed Lapsit sessions run by the student teams and, when they felt ready, participated in delivering part of the program with student teacher support and constructive feedback. Student teachers involved the volunteers in planning the sessions to build confidence, discussing how to involve reluctant adults and unengaged children, and how best to share information on literacy development with parents. The aim was that volunteers would eventually run sessions once students withdrew from the program.

Student teachers were introduced to Rodd’s [17] suggestions that “successful mentors display empathy and understanding, an interest in lifelong learning and professional development, sophisticated interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, understanding of the role of the mentor and considerable early childhood

expertise". They were encouraged to consider their future professional roles as mentors, to develop empathy as part of their repertoire of emotional intelligence [18] and to reflect on the needs of parent volunteers from the local community. As one student wrote:

"For us this was a role reversal. After being the learner or mentee over the past four years at university during our practicums and other work, we now were the "experts" or more knowledgeable people in the relationship" (Cassie, Critical Reflection).

Rodd suggests that the "intended outcome of mentoring is not to control or impose ones' ideas, values and behaviours on another, but rather to encourage mentees to explore possibilities and collaborate in an array of decision-making opportunities" [19]. Another student noted:

"Through the Lapsit project I developed the understanding that mentorship can take a number of different forms and that mentees will not all be at the same experience and skill level. I have realised that mentoring can be a bi-directional relationship. My team and I learnt from the mentee as well as the mentee learning from us" (Allysa, Critical Reflection).

In 2008, a new focus was on the creation of a DVD. The production was funded from a 2007 UniSA Chancellor's Award for Community Engagement, and students from the 2008 cohort participated in the filming and editing. This quality multi-purpose DVD product is now used at UniSA for teaching and learning with on-campus students and those studying at distance, by library services for training Lapsit providers, and for informing those interested in the Lapsit model.

Each year the format of student teachers presenting their evaluations to an audience of peers and interested professionals was highly successful. The 2009 cohort provided recommendations to the library services to support the future sustainability of the project

8. BENEFITS TO PROGRAM AND DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOLARLY WORK

Revitalising university teaching, the project enhanced the roles of academic staff as "active constructors of new knowledge" [20] in response to community need. With 'scholarship' traditionally aligned to research activity, many aspects of leading a service-based learning project within this course enabled the teaching staff to view their work in the scholarly manner envisaged by Boyer [21]. Boyer suggests 'scholarship' has "four separate yet overlapping functions" [22] namely the scholarships of 'discovery', 'application', 'integration' and 'teaching'.

Working with the Lapsit project led staff to engage in the scholarship of 'discovery', exploring how final year students might apply their knowledge in a community

partnership setting, and viewing them as capable and competent practitioners about to transition from university study to professional standing. This scholarship of discovery has led to staff creating and sharing knowledge via conference presentations, publications and the DVD which is being used widely to promote UniSA's approach to experiential learning.

Active partnership with the library services meant that teaching team members also engaged in the scholarship of 'integration', providing meaning for students by placing knowledge in context, and the scholarship of 'application', directly interacting with wider society including services in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, the early childhood field and the tertiary community in Australia.

Staff also participated in the 'scholarship of teaching'. Through the provision of meaningful learning activities during on-campus sessions, staff helped students gain understanding by applying their university study of child development and curriculum theory to their field experience.

The generation of knowledge about using service learning in teacher education has provided an important opportunity for staff to reflect critically on the value of service learning as an application of a practice-based experiential approach. In keeping with Kreber's [23] examples of scholarly activities related to the scholarship of teaching, the teaching team engaged in reflective discussion and peer reviewing of pedagogical methods. This scholarly activity also included gathering and comparing ongoing feedback from students on their learning and their deepened understanding of concepts within the discipline of early childhood education. During the years of the project, the Student Evaluation of Teaching instrument used by UniSA showed that students perceived staff members as up-to-date and knowledgeable teachers in their discipline.

Members of the UniSA ECE program team value this unique experience for student teachers and service learning is now seen as enhancing the academic curriculum and student engagement. The success of the Lapsit project has strengthened plans for the further development of the ECE program's engagement with families and communities. Stronger links with community sites and staff across northern Adelaide have created a basis for future development of service learning as an integrated and vital feature of UniSA's ECE program. These plans coincide with the South Australian State Government's development of integrated early child development and parenting programs in response to an Inquiry into Early Childhood Services [24] and recommendations from an Adelaide Thinker in Residence [25].

Conclusion

The Lapsit program provided opportunities for students to draw upon their understanding of and practical experience with young children, early childhood

curricula and on their teaching skills to model emergent literacy strategies in the community. Positive acclaim from the students was noted:

"It gets us back in the real world"! (Raymond, Critical Reflection).

An outcome of the service learning project has been the team's contribution to knowledge about community partnerships in the specialised field of early childhood education. This has brought recognition to the institution through awards, citations and presentations in the wider community. Lapsit has been recognised by a 2006 National Investment in the Early Years award for "outstanding achievement in supporting parents and caregivers to maximise the development and wellbeing of young children", a 2007 UniSA Chancellor's Award for Community Engagement and a 2007 nomination for a Business / Higher Education Round Table Award for Outstanding Achievement.

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