

Learning Developmental Psychology Through Museum Exhibit Design

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SRCD
2011
montreal

introduction

Service learning is a form of experiential learning that places teaching and learning in a social context. Students apply course knowledge to real-life social problems by serving and interacting with community members. Service learning leads to greater course knowledge and understanding (e.g., Hardy & Schae, 2000; Kretchmar, 2001; Conway, Amel, and Gerwien, 2009) and increased civic engagement (e.g., Altman, 1996). Developmental psychology students at Gustavus Adolphus College entered into a partnership with the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota to create exhibits for children.

procedure

Students were assigned to groups of five or six based on common interests in developmental topics (e.g., motor development, memory, and health & nutrition). Groups researched their developmental topic and participated in discussions about different forms of play and their contribution to child development (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer, 2006). In addition, students observed children at the Creative Play Place, a free indoor play area. With this background, students generated ideas for their museum exhibit. They presented these ideas to museum representatives and received guidance on how to further develop the most promising idea. Throughout the semester, each group maintained a website where they justified their design decisions using academic research and child observations and responded to feedback they received from the museum representatives. Eleven weeks into the semester, they presented their completed exhibits at a public event, where parents and children could interact with the exhibit.

conclusions

The museum exhibit partnership allowed students to more deeply engage with developmental concepts and observe these concepts in children. As one student summarized, "I was able to implement what I learned in class and lectures towards our project. By working on the project, we had to look deeper into understanding child behavior and development, and then see it all in action when we presented our project." In addition, the project fostered community connections. The children's museum chose some student exhibits to develop further by working with interns that came from the developmental psychology class.



objectives

From this partnership, we hoped that students would (a) develop a deeper understanding of developmental psychology concepts by conducting research and applying that research to exhibit design, (b) see those concepts come to life as they observed hundreds of children and parents interact with their exhibit, (c) practice communicating their knowledge to different audiences--children, parents, and museum representatives, and (d) foster connections with museum representatives leading to internship opportunities for students.

results

Students (N=59) evaluated the process of making the exhibit using questions adapted from a recent psychology service learning project (Muir & van der Linden, 2009). As seen in Table 1, students agreed that the project was an enjoyable (88%) and a valuable learning (85%) experience that increased their understanding of psychology (64%) and should remain a regular part of the course (80%). In addition, the project solidified students' understanding of how children learn (81%) and play's contribution to learning (87%). Finally, the project increased student interest in early childhood education (85%) and made them more comfortable interacting with children, parents, and community members (75%).

Table 1. Undergraduate Student Evaluation Results of the Museum Exhibit Project

Item	Undergraduate Student Responses (%)					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	All "Agree" Responses
The Museum Exhibit Project...						
Was a valuable learning experience	1.7	6.8	6.8	61.0	23.7	84.7
Was an enjoyable experience	1.7	3.4	6.8	66.1	22.0	88.1
Should be a regular part of this course	1.7	5.1	13.6	47.5	32.2	79.7
Has increased my understanding of developmental psychology	1.4	10.2	23.7	42.4	22.0	64.4
Has improved my understanding of how play can help children learn	1.7	3.4	8.5	49.2	37.3	86.5
Has increased my interest in early childhood education	0.0	10.2	5.1	55.9	28.8	84.7
Has given me a better understanding of how children learn	0.0	5.1	13.6	47.5	33.9	81.4
Has made me more comfortable interactive with children, parents, and community members	3.4	3.4	18.6	50.8	23.7	74.5

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Special thanks to Caitlin Bayer, Alison Hoffman, Laura Kientzle, and Lydia Voss for helpful comments on a previous version.

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