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Capstone Essay: Growing Through Service Learning

 To be quite honest, I don’t think that it’s a good idea to invite a group of elementary school students to an open museum where there are as many rules as there are fragile items. At least, that’s what I would have said at the beginning of this year before starting Zoo-Mates. Funnily enough, that is the exact situation that I put myself in at a recent mentoring session as part of the program. After having been paired with our mentees since September and completing a range of activities based on visual learning, we were safely able to go to the Taft museum, where all of the kids were inquisitive and eager to team up with us. This obvious progress from the first day of meeting each other makes this a special moment for me so far in my service learning experience.

 Zoo-Mates is a mentoring program run by the University of Cincinnati’s Center for Community Engagement, staff of Rockdale Academy, and Project Connect, which works with children experiencing homelessness in the area. According to the Department of Education, there have been around 3,000 homeless students in Cincinnati Public Schools in recent years, and Project Connect is dedicated to helping as many as they can get through tough times with programs like this (Smith, “Child and Family Homelessness”). UC students, the mentors, are paired up with children in elementary school at Rockdale at random to work toward building a reliable relationship in which both members can help each other to expand their literacies by taking part in activities that involve combinations of storytelling, crafts, questions and explanations, and creativity. These specific themes are important because they make the mentoring sessions that occur every other week become more holistic in the education that they provide, while at the same time being fun without seeming forced.

 When I came back to Zoo-Mates at the beginning of the second semester, I came up with a list of learning objectives that I hoped to get out of my experience by the time it was over. By really putting thought into my time as a mentor, I believe that I have been able to accomplish this. The main goals of my learning objectives were to understand my mentee’s situation at school to be able to better support her during the time that I saw her and to communicate with my supervisors to understand the purpose of Zoo-Mates comprehensively enough to work with my fellow mentors to achieve it. The key word here is communication, with supervisors, with my mentee, and with other mentors. It is the idea that sometimes wasn’t carried out too well and let to confusion in session times and purpose, but was also helpful when done effectively to provide feedback and keep everyone on the same page when with the mentees.

 On the way to fulfilling these learning objectives, I definitely did not have consistent progress, but that’s a good thing because I learned as I went along. Being committed to a cause means having priorities, and looking back I am proud to say that I think that I did a good job of tying in my service with class topics while keeping up with the rest of my schedule without putting forward any less effort in either of these things. I know this because I can tell that my mentee and I have really grown to a point where we can comfortably converse about exciting things that happened one day as opposed to shy silence as at the beginning of the year.

 While that has been happening, the contact between my supervisors and I has also grown, but it has not been without some bumps along the way. I really admire how well connected the program is in its efforts to help the very important cause of education and support for young children. I have absolutely learned more about how to approach situations that I don’t know well and how to interactively create a dependable environment. However, in my opinion, he movement to make this happen has strayed. For the time that we see our mentees, there isn’t a personal feel to it. Perhaps it’s because we are coming close to the end of the year, but I feel that we are being pushed into getting to the school, completing the activity, and leaving. While this is organized and efficient, it doesn’t provide room to cater to the individual needs of the kids, which is something that only some of the supervisors have told us they understand.

 Talking about this problem during class helped me to realize that sometimes it’s best to put my opinions out there and then to let the organizers handle the core of the program. In any case, I am glad that they did ask for our input and write it down, showing me that they value this as a collective progress. Other than in-class discussions, discussion boards, reflection journals, and readings have had an impact in my service-learning experience. The discussion boards let me in on the perspectives of my classmates as they, in some cases, encounter similar experiences, such as tutoring at other schools. Reading about that allows me to review my interactions with others in my service and to consider different approaches that come across more effectively. For example, in our very first reflection journal, they also revealed that all service agencies have their own communication troubles amongst clients, volunteers, and staff despite the best intentions of wanting to help as many clients as possible (“Reflection Journal One” 13 January 2014). This is where the reflection journals become helpful, because I can go back and review in detail an event that happened to realize the occurrence of a critical incident, or the headway that my mentee and I have made, and to see what else I could have done better to relate to her.

 As for the readings, I found the ones on literacy especially helpful in providing viewpoints different from my own education, such as Mike Rose’s “I Just Wanna Be Average,” which showed me the great influence that one person can have on another’s motivation. Much like how Mike Rose’s English teacher awoke in him a desire to write, Zoo-Mates has caused me to rethink the education system (Rose, “I Just Wanna Be Average”). Though working with kids in the program has by no means made me want to change my career path to being a teacher or anything similar, it has pushed me to look at a bigger picture. The time period that I mentor is after Rockdale Academy’s school day has ended, so I don’t really know anything about what has happened positively or negatively for my mentee that day unless she wants to talk about it. This is a very one-sided way of observing the potential that someone has, which also should be considered from a school’s perspective in regard to a child’s home life. I hope that in the future I find an opportunity to be involved with an organization that goes beyond set hours of meeting to help youth in need.

Everyone has to be able to evaluate multiple perspectives and go off of each others’ strengths while exchanging thoughts to come together in achieving a common goal in a service oriented group. This is what makes up a discourse community, something that I explained extensively in the last essay that I wrote, and something supported by linguistics professor John Swales in “The Concept of Discourse Community” (Swales, “The Concept of Discourse Community”). Although I spoke about an academically oriented community in that paper, ideas from my service have just as much support towards the thought of a gathering of people who must correspond with each other and physically lay out a plan to produce work that moves them closer to an objective. With this in mind, I have been better able to incorporate the mindset of my audience into my writing, whether it be fellow community members, peers developing their literacy along with me, or my service-learning partners. By directly being in contact with fellow students, the mentees, and the project organizers, I actually receive feedback based on my actions by noticing how they interact with me, whether it is verbally or not.

Besides hoping that I make a positive impact on my mentee based on the interactions that take place while I am participating in Zoo-Mates, I hope that the program itself has a positive impact towards the ideals of the community and the University of Cincinnati. With students taking the initiative to start and continue service with the purposes of education, fellowship, and embracing diversity, it opens the minds of students, staff, and faculty while giving back to the community of the Cincinnati area. By building a foundation of encouraging well-rounded citizens through ways such as service based classes, community service opportunities, and interdisciplinary study, we can push new generations to be invested in making real changes around them.

Works Cited

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