Q & A with Dr. Sue Humphers-Ginter

Q. Could you please provide some basic information, your name, department, courses taught that have a service-learning component, how many years teaching at MSUM)

 A. Name: Sue Humphers-Ginther, Ph.D.

Department: Sociology and Criminal Justice

 Courses taught with SL component: SOC/SW/WS 308—Social Gerontology

 Years teaching at MSUM: I’m in my 15th year.

Q. What is your background in service-learning (mention any courses you have taken as a student that has a SL component, research done, etc.)

1. Part of my duties includes coordinating the Gerontology Program which was implemented in 1998, the year before I was hired. Among the required courses for the major is SOC/SW/WS 308—Social Gerontology, which is the usual starting point for students interested in studying gerontology. I implemented an academic service learning (ASL) component in this course when I began teaching it in 1999. ASL is a natural fit with the philosophy and pedagogy of aging education, although I never had the opportunity to experience it as a student because active learning techniques such as ASL were not part of sociology pedagogy when I was an undergraduate. Now, however, the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education strongly urges programs to incorporate practica into the gerontology curriculum, including ASL and internships. I’m also very interested in exploring the learning value of ASL, and in particular, whether intergenerational ASL has an impact on students’ attitudes toward older adults and the aging process. For example, does ASL influence negative stereotypes about older people and aging? This topic forms the core of my research agenda; and in each year’s course, I implement a pre- and post-assessment of students’ attitudes. This evaluation piece of service learning is something I find really interesting and important. When service learning is part of a classroom experience, I think it’s essential to continually verify that is has learning value.

Q. Why do you continue to incorporate service-learning into some (or all) of your courses?

1. There are several reasons why I continue to incorporate ASL into this course. First, ASL is an excellent pedagogical tool for bringing classroom topics to life. For example, we spend a fair amount of time on the topic of Social Security. Many college-age students dismiss Social Security because they feel it won’t be there for them when they’re old. But when they have the opportunity talk directly with an older person about how Social Security has influenced their life course, then students begin to see that this is a program that benefits multiple generations, and it’s especially important to today’s older adults, and they find that they have a vested interest in tracking developments in Social Security. Now, Social Security becomes a much more meaningful and interesting topic. Second, ASL serves to extend classroom learning into the community by demonstrating real-world applications of material. Third, ASL helps meet needs in the community. My students meet one-on-one with residents of local long-term care facilities, many of whom have very few, if any, visitors. The older adults value developing relationships with young people, and there is plenty of evidence which shows the health benefits of social interaction. Fourth, ASL gives students an opportunity to assess their interest in pursuing a career in an aging-related field. Some learn that this is NOT what they want to do, which is an important discovery for those students. Most others find the experience to be surprisingly enjoyable. They overcome their fear of talking with older people who aren’t their grandparents and can envision themselves working with older adults in the future. Fifth, ASL facilitates the development of relationships between MSUM and organizations in the community. Students acquire volunteer experience which boosts their preparation for employment or graduate school, and community partners receive an influx of motivated college students to assist in meeting everyday needs.

Q. What do you think are the major benefits for students by having them participate in service-learning?

1. Students benefit from ASL in several ways. Many of my students have never talked with older people other than their own grandparents. ASL gives them an opportunity to step outside their comfort zone. Many are pleasantly surprised to find that they can learn a lot from older people and that older adults aren’t so scary! Further, students are often very pleasantly surprised to learn just how much their elderly “adopted grandparents” appreciate them. Related to this, older adults become approachable to students; they are no longer the “other”. Students begin to see that the concerns of older adults are their own concerns as well, and this process serves to challenge negative stereotypes about older adults and aging. Also, ASL opens up possibilities to all sorts of work opportunities with, or on behalf of, older adults. And, many students comment on the value of bringing classroom material to life. They see that many of the issues we discuss in the classroom have real life meaning and application that really, really matter to people (e.g., Social Security).

Q. What do (one or two) of your service-learning projects look like? (Explain the course it is linked to and what part of the curriculum you believe the students would learn best through their service experience, hours of service, expectations you have for the students i.e., reflective journals or final reflective essay or other)

1. I incorporate ASL into one of my courses, SOC/SW/WS 308—Social Gerontology. My students choose from approximately ten organizations in the community that provide services to older adults, and they initiate the process of gaining entrée into the organization. Each student visits with an older adult in a LTC setting for a minimum of 12 hours over a semester. They become a companion, or adopted grandchild, for an older person, many of whom don’t have regular (or any) visitors. The students keep a reflective journal which includes their expectations and learning goals for the project, as well as their activities and observations. The journal becomes a helpful tool in their selection of a paper topic and in their writing of the paper. I also implement some in-class writing activities about their experiences and have them identify and explore connections to classroom topics. Students write a research paper near the end of the semester based on a theme that emerges from their visits. In their papers, they connect their field observations with library research on the theme.

Q. What is some advice for someone who is considering adding service-learning into their courses?

1. A service learning project is an exciting addition to a course that can take a class in new directions, but it can be a lot of work to set up, particularly for a large class. Be flexible! An ASL project that involves making community connections outside of the classroom means giving up some control. Unanticipated issues will arise, and these will be much easier to resolve if one is flexible in their approach. One area that may warrant some flexibility pertains to student complaints about the out-of-class time required of them, a problem which is even more concerning for those who lack their own transportation.

There are important distinctions to be made between volunteer work/service, ASL, and internships. Without a doubt, the most important question to consider when contemplating the introduction of ASL into a class is: What makes ASL a pedagogical tool that enhances and deepens classroom learning, as opposed to simply providing community service? This question should be raised and addressed continually. Think a lot about how ASL is different from volunteer service and internships. When partnering with agencies, it may require repeating the message that this isn’t about volunteering, but it’s about students learning. Continually think about ways to evaluate the impact of ASL on students’ learning. How do students change because of ASL? And how can we go about measuring that change? Just logging hours does not advance our understanding of why and how incorporating ASL into courses is of value. When ASL is part of a classroom experience, it’s very important to continually verify that it has learning value and to explore ways to actually measure the learning value that may occur. In my coordination of service learning projects with community partners, this message is one that can be challenging to communicate. I do not want my students to be volunteers in the coffee shop or the gift shop. Rather, my students need the opportunity to develop one-to-one relationships with older adults and spend time with that person several times during the semester.