

**FOURTH YEAR STUDENT SOCIAL
WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE-
LEARNING IN AN ODL CONTEXT AT A
SERVICE LEARNING CENTRE**

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“Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand” (Confucius, 450 BC).

INTRODUCTION

Training students towards becoming social workers within an ODL context challenges us to cross the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers (Unisa ODL Policy. 2008:2).

In response to these challenges the Bright Site Service Learning Centre was initiated by the Department of Social work at Unisa to provide opportunities for learning while engaging in service rendering to communities. (I.e. This articulates in 'service-learning' as an attempt to respond to, and address the real-life needs of individuals, groups and communities through the application of acquired social work knowledge and skills).

With our approach to service-learning rooted in constructivism our students *are not passive recipients of information*, but *actively involved in creating their own learning experience*. As a result, learning is facilitated by creating opportunities for learners to actively engage and interact with the institution, their lecturers, study material and fellow students.

Based on the aforementioned, the Department of Social Work at Unisa started with a process of self reflection on the unique circumstances of our students and the meanings they attached to their learning experiences whilst in service of the community.

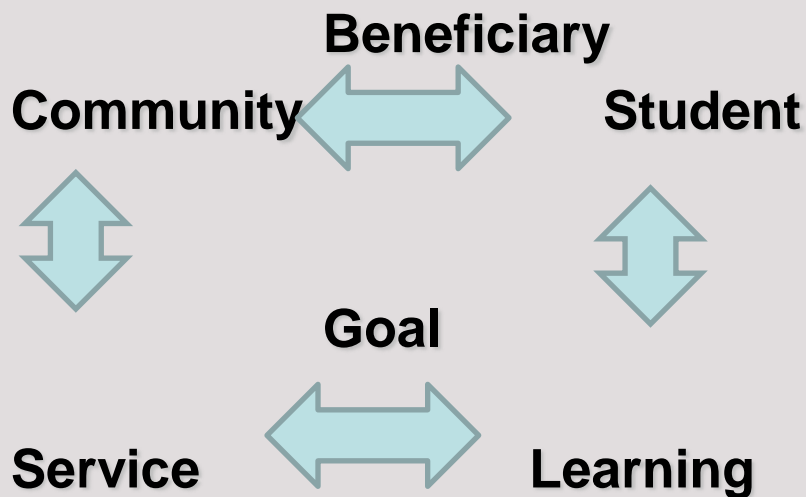
This presentation will amplify the learning and insights obtained whilst we made this road by walking *with*, reflecting *with* and learning *with* and *from* our students.

NEED AND PROBLEM FORMULATION

- **In responding to a call for innovative and responsive social work interventions and transformation,** (Cf. Skweyiya, 2009) the Department of Social Work at Unisa adopted a **learning philosophy** and practice that attempts to respond to, not only the unique demands of Open Distance Learning, but also South Africa's welfare needs, and the developmental approach integrated in Government Welfare Policy.
- The learning philosophy and practice referred to is underpinned by a **post-modernist, social constructivist, person centred approach.** This approach fits with the multicultural worldviews of the SA society, as well as the developmental approach of the Department of Social Development.

- From a **social construction discourse**, “reality”, as we know it is constructed through our interaction with others. Reality therefore, cannot be seen as “unified” or “absolute”, but rather as people’s interpretation of their own world experiences (Freedman & Combs, 1996:33).
- Fraser (2006:8) emphasises **learning as a process of social construction** where learners first and foremost learn from their interaction with others rather than merely relying on lectures, or study material. In an ODL context interaction with others and lectures are limited. Learning and assessment as part of learning in an ODL context should thus compensate for, and, or facilitate interaction with others.

- The Council for Higher Education (CHE) translates “service learning” as “applied learning” directed at the needs of the community and integrated into an academic programme and curriculum.
- From the aforementioned and in practically applying this, the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service Learning Centre adopted the following model:



Instead of placing some of the students at a welfare organisation they are now placed at the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service – learning Centre for their practical work.

In view of the fact that the Bright Site Learning Centre has been in operation for two years, we needed to reflect on, and assess how learning, whilst being in service to the community, benefited the student social workers but also the beneficiaries of the student services.

“We learn through assessment ... and assessment is learning and that ...feedback, evaluation, judgement and assessment are inherent in learning and living and is necessary for both (Brown & Knight, 1994:30-37).

This presentation amplifies the learning experience of the students placed at the Bright Site and those of the service beneficiaries.

GOAL AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

- The goal of the study was to develop an in-depth understanding of fourth year student social workers' experiences of service learning in an ODL context at the Bright Site of Sunnyside Service Learning Centre.
- A qualitative research approach was utilised and all the students enrolled at the Bright Site Service Learning Centre were included in this study.
- Students were instructed to write narratives based on a guideline provided. The narratives were thematically analysed and topics for discussion in a subsequent focus group were deduced.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

- The **following themes emerged** from the thematic analysis of the narratives:
 - Students' experiences of their practical placement at the Bright Site Service Learning Centre.
 - Meanings attached to supervision and practical training.
 - Student's theoretical understanding and application of the Person-Centred Approach.
 - Support structures and coping resources employed by students at the Bright Site Service Learning Centre.
 - Students accounts of their own personal development.

Student Social work Services in Durban

- **“Let us not make a mistake – that the hunger is only for a piece of bread. The hunger of today is so much greater: for love – to be wanted, to be loved, to be cared for, to be somebody” (Mother Teresa)**
- Factors that threaten the wellbeing of people in the Durban include poverty, unemployment, migration, a high incidence of HIV and AIDS, substance abuse, gender based violence and crime and petty thieving.

Student Social work Services Cont.

- Refugee women
- Working with the community of elderly residents
- Working with the waste recyclers
- HIV and Aids awareness and substance abuse
- Art
- Isnembe Secondary School

CONCLUSIONS

- The Bright Site Service Learning Centre succeeds in providing an alternative practice setting where knowledge and skills learnt can be put into service of communities benefiting both the learners and the community.
- The Department of Social Work at Unisa as an ODL institution bridge the gap between residential and distance education.
- The students prefer studying at Unisa because of its affordability and flexibility allowing students to study at their own pace.