

## Engaged Scholarship in the Classroom: The Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS

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### Abstract

Although frequently located in populous areas, the nation's research universities increasingly are viewed as isolated from the communities around them. The disaffection with academia is fueled by a perception that faculty research has little relevance beyond the laboratory. The present article describes one effort at a metropolitan public university to integrate academic scholarship into the community via service-learning. Students in The Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS studied psychology theory and research in the classroom while working throughout the semester at an AIDS service organization. Their challenge was to use social psychology as a framework for understanding and developing solutions to some of the problems confronting the organization's staff and clients. The students' contributions, both as scholars and as volunteers, provided much-needed help to the agency. Basic research was shown to have immediate meaning for the community, which strengthened the relationship between the university and its neighbor.

### Introduction

Although frequently located in populous areas, the nation's research universities increasingly are viewed as isolated from the communities around them. The growing public disaffection with academia is fueled by the perception that faculty research has little relevance beyond the laboratory (e.g., *Coor 1999; Mathews 1996*). Some campuses are responding to this criticism with a new emphasis on community-based scholarship. Encouraged by the Kellogg Commission report, *The Engaged Institution (1999)*, faculty are applying their research and professional expertise to community needs in collaboration with nonacademic partners. By integrating the community into teaching and research, engaged scholars expand the perception both within and outside the academy of faculty roles and responsibilities (*Finkelstein 2001*). The present article describes one effort at a metropolitan public university to bring engaged scholarship into the undergraduate curriculum. A class that combined classroom study with a volunteer experience examined ways in which basic research can help address pressing societal needs. The practice of integrating community work into the academic curriculum is variously referred to as service-learning or experiential

learning (e.g., *Bringle and Hatcher 1996*). A service-learning approach to scholarship can produce greater interest and deeper and longer-lasting learning of theoretical concepts and methodology than traditional classroom instruction alone; students learn better when they believe their work has real consequences (e.g., *Ramaley 1997*).

In *The Social Psychology of HIV/AIDS*, students studied social psychology in the classroom and worked throughout the semester at an AIDS service organization near campus. The aim of the class was to help students discover the applicability of social psychology theory and research to issues that confront the organization's staff and clients. Introduced in the spring of 2000, the class is the first service-learning course in the University of South Florida's psychology curriculum. Yet psychology, with all its diversity, provides the perfect discipline for blending theory and application.

The university's community partner in this endeavor, the Tampa AIDS Network, has served approximately 6,500 clients since its inception in 1985. According to its mission statement, "The Tampa AIDS Network (TAN) is a community organization which provides prevention education, emotional and physical support services and advocacy on behalf of all persons affected by HIV disease." The AIDS crisis is particularly salient in Florida; the state has the third highest number of persons living with the disease (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2000*). TAN offers an array of programs; opportunities for student volunteers include the supplemental food pantry, the HIV testing department, and outreach/prevention education. The pantry, which resembles a small grocery store, serves more than two thousand clients each month; customers purchase products using a monthly allotment of points. TAN also offers free, anonymous HIV testing twice weekly at two Tampa locations. Outreach/prevention education is the agency's largest department, with programs that reach more than forty thousand adults and children each year.

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Each of the three departments faces challenges that have been directly or indirectly addressed by social psychology research. For example, some clients who qualify for the food pantry feel stigmatized by their financial hardship and consequently forgo the service.

Research on the self-image and the strategies that individuals adopt in order to maintain self-esteem constitutes one area with direct relevance to this problem. In the HIV testing program, counselors strive to convince people to reduce their risky behaviors. They may be aided in this task by the literature on persuasion, decision-making processes, conformity, and perceptions of risk. Educators in outreach/prevention, to be effective at their jobs, must know how to tailor their messages to their various target communities. In addition to the persuasion literature, research on social influence, prejudice, and stereotypes may be of help. Clearly the pertinent topics are not limited to those listed here, and students were free to link their experiences to any aspect of social psychology.

The students applied the empirical research they selected to an agency problem in an effort to understand it and to formulate potential solutions. The faculty instructor hoped the exercise would prove valuable not only to the undergraduates, but also to TAN. Like many social service agencies, TAN has suffered severe budgetary cutbacks in recent years. Drastic reductions in personnel have forced the remaining staff to assume additional duties while struggling to serve an increasing client base. Because people now live longer with HIV and AIDS, client needs are increasing in number and complexity while available resources are shrinking. Consequently, the organization is increasingly dependent on volunteer help and seeks to develop new strategies to effectively serve its clients. The university thus is ideally poised to help the local community while enriching undergraduate education (e.g., *Checkoway 1997*).

### Course Requirements: Linking Pedagogy with Service

In addition to the scheduled class meetings (three hours per week), each student volunteered at TAN a minimum of twenty hours during the semester. A true partnership between university and community entities evolved as TAN employees worked with the faculty instructor to craft the course. Agency staff taught the mandatory HIV training class and volunteer orientation and oversaw the students' volunteer activities. The orientation introduced students to the rights and responsibilities of TAN volunteers. Students also learned about the functions of each department and chose one in which to work; they were free to rotate areas and to change departments at any time.

A graduate teaching assistant helped coordinate the placements. This was particularly important to TAN since one casualty of the staff reduction was the volunteer coordination department. Of

greater academic significance, the assistantship showed a future teacher how community-based experiences can enhance the curriculum and how engagement with the community can in turn enhance research (Finkelstein 2002).

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Of course, service-learning innovations work only when the learning component is attended to as diligently as the service dimension. Psychology department guidelines state that students who graduate with a major in psychology should be able to describe several major theories in psychology and explain how they can be used to practical ends. The guidelines also specify that students should learn to conduct a literature search, think critically, speak effectively, and write clearly about the implications of empirical data for questions of psychological importance. However, the Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1998) reports that many students leave college lacking any understanding of how one type of information relates to another. They often cannot think logically, write clearly, or speak coherently. The commission proposed an Academic Bill of Rights, maintaining that students have the right to learn through inquiry rather than simple knowledge transmission, develop oral and written communication skills, and be prepared for life beyond graduation.

The course requirements ensured that students would acquire the skills identified by the psychology department and outlined in the Academic Bill of Rights. In exploring the psychology literature, we focused primarily on empirical studies that were designed to test theories or models of social behavior. Early in the semester, the students received a brief review of research methods in psychology (experiments versus correlational studies, hypothesis testing, operationalizing variables). The students were assigned a social psychology textbook, and each week a different chapter from the text provided the starting point for classroom discussion. First, the major theories and important empirical contributions to the topic were examined, with no links made to HIV or AIDS. The concern was that students understand the theoretical issues and the data that provided the basis for the theories. Next, students shared their volunteer experiences from the preceding week: their duties, interactions with staff and clients, interesting anecdotes, and their reactions

to those experiences. (Students kept logs in which they reported, and reflected on, their work at the agency.) Finally, connections between the research and the volunteer activities were examined.

These discussions, along with the logs, provided the foundation for a paper due at the end of the semester. Like the classroom discussions, the paper was to link some area of social psychology with a student's particular experiences and observations as a volunteer. Each paper was to reference at least two articles relating to the selected social psychology topic. The articles were to be taken from peer-reviewed psychology journals and were to address basic theory and research, not HIV or AIDS. Students also gave oral presentations based on their papers. The presentation and paper encapsulated much of what the psychology department espouses as goals for its majors: searching and understanding the primary literature, critical thinking, and effective writing and speaking. The logs and class discussions also strengthened listening, writing, and synthesizing skills.

### Student Logs: Reaction and Reflection

Excerpts from the logs of students in each of the three TAN departments are reprinted verbatim below. The papers that evolved from three students' experiences (one from each department) are discussed in the following section.

**Testing:** One counselor, Vivian, asked me if I had any questions after I went in for results with her. I had noticed that she didn't do much to convince her client to change his behavior. He may have been negative this time, but his lifestyle sounded like he might not be so lucky next time. She answered his questions, but unlike Michael (who I also went in with) she didn't tell him a slew of information on how to avoid contracting the disease and remind him exactly how he can get it. So I asked her if she

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thought that there was some kind of behavior change that occurred after coming in to get their results. Do they change their lifestyle in any miniscule way after the educational discussion with the

counselor on HIV/AIDS? She told me, “Well, they’re only human.” Which, needless to say, surprised me. I wasn’t saying they should be looked down on or persecuted for who they are, but I believe that the counselors have an excellent opportunity to educate and try to persuade the client to incite a behavior change. (*Bridget*)

Testing at the South Tampa office was more fun and organized than the North office. I answered the phone and helped people as they came in. You get to know people on the phone. There isn’t any face to face contact so they don’t feel threatened. They also feel as though they have to give you reasons and excuses so you get info you didn’t really want to know. (*Christine*)

**Outreach/Prevention Education:** I met Vivian and her niece at the health fair in Plant City. I wasn’t sure what to expect and quickly found out that it was designed for the kids in the community and not everyone was happy to see TAN . . . I thought the parents who quickly shuffled their kids past the table missed a great opportunity to protect their kids. I think most parents aren’t aware of how much their kids know at young ages. I had a 9-year old come up and ask for a condom and tell me all about what they’re for. (He only wanted it for a balloon though!) (*Elizabeth*)

When I walked into the bar, it was like everything came to a halt. Here I am a black female, intruding on a bunch of older gay males. These males were drinking, playing video games, and watching Whitney Houston videos. I spotted Tom at the bar with his “box” of condoms. I settled in and observed the bar scene . . . Tom also explained his tactics for outreach. Mostly this involved coming right out and saying, “Hi! I’m Tom and I’m homosexual. What are you?” Tom’s purpose or point that night was to hand out condoms and pamphlets to anyone wanting them. Condoms were placed by the restrooms for those who didn’t want to talk. (*Anya-Kaye*)

**Food Pantry:** I really got to see the clients today. I got to speak with them. I was able to help them. I have a natural high. One man saddened me though. He seemed so happy to be at the pantry, yet there was sadness to him. He was very open with me about his predicament. He lost his partner in September. As a result, he lost their home. He now lives in a small apartment in S. Tampa. He cannot drive, so he cannot come to the pantry like he used to. He seemed so lonely. He started talking to me. He started talking to me! I can’t believe it. I can’t imagine all he’s lost. I think the pantry means more than free food to this man. I think for him, the pantry means friends. He came to talk with friends. Someone who would listen. That’s what I was. That’s what I tried to be. I think that’s

what I'm going to try to do from here on out. I want to be an encouragement to the clients. I realize that I can do that no matter where I am in the pantry. Even when I'm pricing foods in the back, I'm making it possible for many of the clients to nourish their bodies physically as well as emotionally. They come for the food and the fellowship. If on one day I can't do one, I can surely do the other. There is a feeling of empowerment to volunteering. I feel like [I am] genuinely helping others. I like this feeling. (*Aiko*)

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***Not surprisingly, not all pantry experiences were pleasant:*** Today I had a little argument with a customer. She wanted to shop for her husband but her name was not on his list. I needed an ID and she refused, so I called Jay; he is the Food Pantry head manager, and he said the same thing. That she was not allowed to shop here without ID. That was the rule and he does not bend it for anyone. She finally went to the car and pulled out her ID. She told me in Spanish that I better remember her, cause next time she will not bring her ID, so I told her then next time we will not be able to help you. After an hour of shopping, she went way over [her allotted points], I told her I had to take some of the food out. She called me an *hija de puta*, which is a daughter of a bitch in Spanish. Needless to say I refused to pack anything and went to get another person to finish her off. I cannot understand why people are so angry when I am here to help them. (*Aida*)

### **The Outcome: Student Observations, Agency Reactions**

After the semester was completed and the grades submitted, each student's paper was shared with the appropriate department director at TAN. The directors were asked to provide written feedback indicating the usefulness of the papers and the likelihood of their adopting any of the suggestions. The staff praised many of the recommendations and reported their intension to implement some of them. A few were already in place, and some they constrained from using.

As described above, Bridget's experiences in the testing department led to concerns that the staff were not making sufficient attempts to reduce clients' risky behaviors. She worried that in an

effort to be nonjudgmental, the counselors lost a valuable opportunity to effect behavior change. Bridget used research on attitude-behavior relationships to offer strategies for revising the pre- and post-test counseling protocols. She observed that although people know about the protective value of condoms, women in particular often refuse to accept responsibility for using them. The literature on attitudes demonstrates that when people feel accountable for actions that can have aversive consequences (e.g., failing to use condoms), they experience a tension (cognitive dissonance) that can induce them to change their behavior. Therefore, Bridget argued, communicating to women that they control their sexual behavior should increase their use of condoms. She suggested that as the testing staff educate women about available protective measures, they continually link the information to the issue of personal responsibility.

The testing coordinator was most interested in the literature showing that persuasion is more effective the more arguments one offers, even when they are only weakly related to the issue.

Bridget recommended that counselors increase the number and variety of messages they communicate to clients about behaviors that put them at risk for HIV and AIDS. The department intends to incorporate this suggestion into a revised counseling protocol. However, the counselors cannot be as didactic as Bridget would like. The agency is guided by a model developed by the Florida Department of Health. The aim of

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the approach is to help clients explore all their options and make personal decisions about acceptable levels of risk taking.

A student in outreach/prevention education also adapted the literature on attitudes and persuasion to that department’s work with adolescents. Elizabeth used the theory of planned behavior as a springboard for motivating behavior change. The theory posits that behavior can be modified when the prevailing social norms encourage change and when people perceive that they are in control of their actions (again the notion of personal responsibility). Elizabeth suggested that working to change norms regarding condom use

could reduce risky sexual behavior. To this end, she urged the outreach staff to focus on children who are not yet sexually active and to instill social norms that are conducive to health-promoting behaviors. Perceptions of behavioral control, she advised, will result from providing individuals easy access to protection (e.g., condoms) and by teaching them how to negotiate safer sex practices with a partner.

Elizabeth's paper also documented how aspects of the messenger influence the effectiveness of a persuasive presentation. For example, persuasion is more successful when the communicator is likable and is accepted by a relevant reference group (e.g., parents, peers). Based on these findings, Elizabeth recommended that TAN recruit outreach volunteers from the communities being served. Increasing the pool of community volunteers would also help address the organization's financial problems, which preclude hiring additional staff. The outreach director noted that modifying social norms is a longstanding objective of the education/outreach program. However, approaches with youth are limited because the Hillsborough County Board of Education bars speakers from discussing condoms in school-based programs. TAN staff did respond favorably to Elizabeth's recommendation to increase community involvement through volunteer recruitment and will be more aggressive in trying to increase the volunteer pool.

Aiko, working in the food pantry, used the research on both interpersonal relationships and volunteerism to simultaneously solve two problems facing the department. First, some clients who qualify for the pantry are reluctant to use it. Second, the pantry is in continual need of additional workers. The agency recently stopped accepting court-ordered community service hours because the volunteers proved unreliable and unhelpful.

Aiko offered the literature on reciprocity as a possible solution. She noted that people experience distress when they are in relationships that they perceive to be inequitable, and they take steps to restore equity. Aiko suggested that clients might feel less uncomfortable using the pantry if they also contribute to its operation. If they can reciprocate the agency's generosity, then they will feel entitled to use the services the agency provides. Restoring reciprocity allows the client to utilize a much-needed service and provides the agency with a committed volunteer. Aiko bolstered her argument with findings from the literature on long-term volunteers. For some, volunteering serves a "protective function," reducing negative feelings such as guilt or addressing specific personal problems. When these needs are met, volunteering is likely to be sustained.

The pantry's volunteer coordinator endorsed the proposition that volunteering creates a sense of reciprocity and entitlement. In order to recruit more client volunteers, the staff had recently instituted a policy awarding those who volunteer twenty hours per month an additional two hundred points to spend in the pantry. Additional efforts will be made to solicit help from clients.

### Assessing the Impact on Students

Evaluations obtained at the end of the semester measured the perceived value of the volunteer experience and the extent to which students believed that linking theory and practice served as an effective form of pedagogy. Their responses revealed that interest in service-learning was high at the beginning of class (seven of the ten reporting previous volunteer activities) and remained high throughout. Nine indicated that they would enroll in another service-learning class; one responded "maybe."

Eight agreed that volunteering aided their understanding of the classroom material. One student explained: "I was able to see things happening. When it's in course material, you are just taking a scholar's word for it, but by volunteering at TAN, one can see whether or not it's applicable to the real world." Another summarized her experience: "Through volunteering, we were able to uncover topics that we wanted to learn more about, which we then researched and presented—it was much better than just picking a random topic that couldn't really be applied to your everyday experience."

Finally, eight respondents believed the class facilitated their relationships with their classmates and, similarly, eight felt it facilitated their relationships with the professor. One student concluded, "A lot of classes should use this course as a model. These types of classes are needed in [the] University, especially for students who want to go to grad school. Courses like this not only give you research experience, but also give you a chance to know your teacher on another level." Seventy percent said the course improved their knowledge of their community.

### Conclusions

In recent years, this nation's research universities have earned the reputation of being disconnected from the communities that house—and in the case of public universities, support—them. When academicians do reach beyond the campus, it is often to conduct studies in which the community serves as little more than a giant subject pool (e.g., *Finkelstein 2002*). The recent emphasis on engaged

scholarship provides a step toward changing the relationship between the university and the public. Engagement implies partnership; each participant brings expertise to a collaboration, and each benefits from it (e.g., *Driscoll and Sandmann 2001; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2000*).

In the present service-learning venture, the TAN staff were as critical to the success of the course as the faculty instructor. Academic scholarship and the knowledge and experience of agency workers combined to fulfill a department's pedagogical mission while offering the students a rich and varied educational environment. In turn, the students' efforts as scholars and as volunteers provided much-needed help to the agency. Engaging in basic research that had immediate relevance to the community thus became a means of strengthening the relationship between the university and its neighbor.

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### About the Author

Marcia A. Finkelstein is professor of psychology at the University of South Florida where she has served on the faculty since 1981. Until 1995, she conducted research in the area of visual psychophysics. At that time, in order to more directly connect her work with the community, she began a research program in social psychology, examining attitude-behavior relationships and their influence on judgments about condom use. She has also studied the determinants of long-term volunteerism in an AIDS service organization. Current research examines the applicability of models of volunteerism to organizational citizenship behavior.

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