

HOLISTIC APPROACH TO SERVICE LEARNING IN INTERIOR DESIGN

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Students enrolled in an introductory Interior Design course completed a project in which they planned the interior decorating for a Katrina Cottage. A Katrina cottage is a design developed by Andres Duany to provide emergency housing along the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. Students interviewed individuals who served as their “clients,” developed a floor plan for the project, selected items within their \$2000 budget, developed a presentation board for the project and wrote a reflection paper about the experience. The project allowed students to consider the tragedy that impacted their area and to see the challenges that many in the area experienced related to housing. Student reflections indicated that they found this to be a valuable experience.

The importance of service-learning in higher education has been studied by numerous professionals and proven to be valuable to participating students as well as the community. Seifer and Connors (2007) define service-learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (p. 5). The concept of service learning for economic and social benefits can be incorporated in introductory level courses to form the foundation for higher level courses where students can expand on the concept. Martin (2001) indicates that “competing resources and societal problems are forcing the mission of the academic community to refocus its mission, draw upon and apply the findings of pedagogical resources” and that “the new scholarship of engagement encompasses application and dissemination through outreach, community service, and service learning” (p. 38).

Students enrolled in an Introduction to Interior Design course in a university in an area impacted by Hurricane Katrina had an opportunity to gain a different perspective on the impact of the hurricane. The final project for the course required students to plan the interior decorating for a Katrina cottage. A Katrina cottage is a small permanent house, which is considered safe and affordable and can be assembled quickly. Architect and planner Andres Duany developed the concept for the Katrina cottage in response to the overwhelming need for emergency housing along the Gulf Coast after the hurricane. The Katrina cottage design used for this project was the one bedroom cottage with 576 square feet of living space designed to be wheelchair accessible. (<http://www.cusatocottages.com>).

Service learning activities require purpose, responsibility, objectives and reflection or evaluation by students. The purpose of this academic learning project was for students to better understand the purpose of planning and completing housing suitable for hurricane victims. Students were required to select two individuals to serve as their “clients”. These individuals were not individuals who had lost their homes to the hurricane but individuals who were well aware of the tragedy that occurred in the surrounding area. This allowed the student and the “clients” to realize the loss that many in the area suffered. A client profile was compiled by the student using information gathered during a client interview concerning their color preferences,

style preferences and activities which would occur in the home. Many students used their parents or other family members as their “clients”. Students found working with two individuals, with each of the individuals having varying preferences related to color, style, and activities, to be challenging.

The budget for the project was \$2000 to furnish and decorate the cottage. (This was imaginary money). Documentation of the cost of all materials used to furnish the cottage was required. Students were allowed to have one item donated from a family member or friend. Most students choose for the donated item to be the mattress which was the most expensive item in many cases. The following items were required for the home: Sofa, chair, dining room furniture, one bed, dresser or other storage unit for bedroom, bed, bathroom, and kitchen linens, flooring, rugs and accessories as needed. Students were encouraged to select furniture which served a dual purpose such as a futon that could be used as a sofa and as a bed or a bed with built-in storage since storage is at a premium in small spaces. A floor plan with all furnishings and accompanying pictures or swatches for the furnishings, paint, floor, accessories etc. were required for the final project presentation board as shown in figure 1 and 2. In order for students to check their progress throughout the project the grade sheet was given at the beginning of the course.

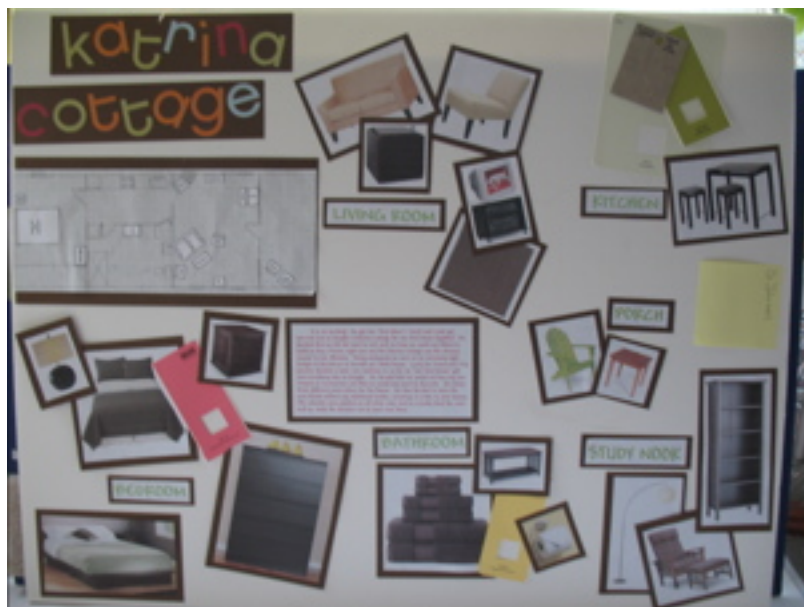


Figure 1. Presentation Board for Katrina Cottage



Figure 2. Floor Plan for Katrina Cottage

In addition to students applying what they knew about space planning and interior decorating, this project allowed students to see the challenges of living in a small space. Students were required to write a reflection paper on their thoughts about the project. Various comments indicated a clearer understanding of the challenges, not only of recovery from the storm, but housing issues as well. One student wrote the following statement that reflected so well the feelings of many students in the class, “I really enjoyed putting together my Katrina Cottage home. It did remind me of the things my parents and I went through after Katrina, but it also gave hope for the future and for those who haven’t been able to come home yet”. A second student wrote, “listening and understanding are key elements to creating a space for someone else at times this was a tough job but a good experience”. Other students indicated the challenge of the project was huge but the value was worth the effort and that the project should be continued in future courses. These comments reinforce the statement by Martin (2001) that “Service learning should promote civic responsibility and address community needs, all the while instilling a life-long commitment to service” (p. 39).

While every student was able to stay within the \$2000 budget, many indicated the project was very challenging due to the limited amount of money and space they had to utilize for the project. The reality of the cost of decorating a home became very evident to the students. One student indicated that the “most stressful and challenging part of this entire project was choosing furniture that was pleasing to the client, but was still manageable to the budget. It was a good challenge, but one that took time and effort to find what I was looking for.” Another student indicated, “At one point during the project, I was wishing that I was actually decorating this house. That was the point that I realized that this was actually fun! Overall the most difficult part of the project was the budget. It was also interesting to try and incorporate what both clients’ wanted into the home”. Students learned to shop in discount stores, outlet stores, warehouse stores and to look for sales or discounted items so that they could purchase the extras they wanted for the home such as towel sets, bath rugs, mirrors, and other accessories for the home.

Service learning activities often serve to further students’ knowledge about community. Through completing this activity, students were able to understand some of the challenges that individuals in their region had to face after Hurricane Katrina. Some students used the summary to write a story about a fictional family that had lost their home to Hurricane Katrina and how having the Katrina cottage helped them to feel at home again. The project inspired one student to write a fictional story about herself and her fiancé choosing the cottage as their first home. Other students reflected on what it was like for their family after the storm.

Working on this project allowed students to consider the human side of interior decorating, as well as the aesthetic side, of interior decorating. A similar project which helped students see the human side of interior decorating took place in a 4-year interior design program using nursing homes as the focus of the project with the purpose to better the lives of the residents through redesign. Teams of students were assigned a facility to evaluate and re-design for the project. Each team designed a renovation for each perspective nursing home. The project allowed students the learning experience of working in teams and with clients, as well as interacting with and observing a special population. As a result of this project, students also reported heightened awareness of personal family situations where nursing home stays might be eminent (Nussbaumer & Rowland, 2007).

Service learning provides an opportunity for students to recall and apply more of what they learn than in traditional curriculum and the academic dialog in the classroom is enhanced through the service experience (Moser, 2005). The holistic dimension evidenced by student

reflections concerning not just practical application but personal feelings made this a project that students will not soon forget. One student commented “I never really had a big interest in interior design so I was just in complete shock, and I was wondering how I would ever get this project done. . . .Overall, I really enjoyed doing this. I even thought about taking more classes dealing with design”.

This project could be modified to fit the many different challenges faced in various communities where there is a need. One such example from the literature is another southern university interior design program in which students developed a hurricane relief project for an interior design class. They worked with Habitat for Humanity in building and finishing a home for Hurricane Katrina victims (Peng, 2007). Communities that are impacted by natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, tornadoes, etc, could use the Katrina cottage or a similar design to quickly provide housing for individuals who have lost their homes. The challenge of furnishing a small space with a limited amount of money is one that can be lessened by family and consumer sciences teachers and students that have the knowledge and skills to meet this challenge. family and consumer sciences teachers could develop a service learning project to work with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity to decorate a home within a fixed budget. The rewards for a project such as this go beyond the knowledge gained to the lives that are touched and changed in and out of the classroom.

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