Making a Difference: Measuring Impact

Theme 2.2
Part 2 of "Moving from Service to Solutions"

Bonner Community Engagement Curriculum: The 8 Themes Series

BWBRS Description: Part 2 - Making a Difference - Measuring Impact of the Moving from Service to Solutions series explores strategies for solving complex social problems by looking at how to measure the effectiveness of an intervention and examining how one might make the greatest impact.

Overview: Part 2 (of 4) of the Moving from Service to Solutions series further engages students in thinking critically about nonprofit and governmental approaches and interventions. It helps students to understand the challenges that social service organizations face in developing and implementing programs that lead to positive outcomes and impacts. This workshop seeks to illustrate challenges to effectively measuring the impact of an intervention or response to a social problem and explore a concept that proponents believe can create the greatest possible impact: effective altruism. This module utilizes multiple interactive activities and is highly engaging.

First Year

Key Words: Team building, social justice, leadership, communication, critical thinking, 8 Themes, impact assessment

8 Themes: First Year Students in 2nd semester

Bonner Developmental Connections: This session is targeted towards first-year students as they are beginning to analyze strategies in community engagement work. It is best done in conjunction with other Service to Solutions modules. It could be implemented during Class Meetings or retreats.

Bonner/VALUE Rubric Outcomes:

This workshop will build students' Critical Thinking and Perspective Taking skills, moving them into higher levels. It can also promote students' Communication and Leadership Skills. Finally, as students make connections across their Bonner community engagement and other college learning experiences, it can build their abilities for Integrative Learning.

Workshop Learning Outcomes:

· Participants will learn about the challenges of effectively measuring the impact of an intervention or response to a social problem.
· Participants will explore a concept that proponents believe can create the greatest possible impact: *effective altruism.*
· Participants will take away hope and inspiration in a time when the challenges that face society can oftentimes feel paralyzing.

Materials:

· Internet
· Laptop/AV equipment to project video
· Powerpoint
· Printed article
· Whiteboard or flip chart
· Markers
· For optional marshmallow challenge, see list of materials

How to Prepare:

Facilitator should review the entirety of the workshop. Note there are multiple sections, including a part A and B. Facilitator should be conscious of time, particularly during discussions. Facilitator should print article to provide as final handout and prepare marshmallow challenge materials, if needed.

Brief Outline:

The workshop is interactive and discussion based. It requires the facilitator to read many prompts aloud.

The workshop is broken into a Part A and Part B with 7 sections, including the optional marshmallow challenge. It should last approx. 60-90 minutes.

Part A

1) Introduction   suggested time 1-2 minutes
2) Evidence of Impact   suggested time 15-20 minutes
3) Measuring Impact   suggested time 10 minutes
4) Measuring the Impact of your Bonner Experience suggested time 20-30 minutes

Part B

5) Effective Altruism   suggested time 30 minutes
6) Closing   suggested time 5 minutes
7) Marshmallow Challenge (optional)   suggested time 35 minutes

Part A

Part 1) Introduction
Suggested time: 1-2 minutes

Begin by reading the scene aloud.

How do we know if something is really making an impact? There are many seemingly great nonprofits and governmental initiatives, but many of them might actually be ineffective, or in some cases, even harmful. How do we differentiate between the ones

that are backed up with strong evidence, as opposed to the ones that just have great PR. How do we know whether a program really works? What kinds of evidence do we need to see? Often a program might sound great, but it doesn't actually succeed.

Today we're going to explore strategies for most effectively solving complex social problems by looking how to measure the effectiveness of an intervention and examining how one might make the greatest impact.

Part 2) Evidence of Impact
Suggested time: 15-20 minutes

The first activity illustrates the importance of sound evidence when discerning the impact of an organization or intervention.

Ask the participants if they have ever played the game, "Two Truths and a Lie." In this game, people tell three statements about their lives. Two of these statements are true, while the third is false. Everyone has to guess which one is the lie.

Today we're going to do the same thing, but with regard to solutions to social problems. There are many nonprofit organizations that sound wonderful. But how many of them have programs that actually work?

Tell the participants about the following three nonprofit organizations, each of which has received at least tens of millions of dollars in funding. At least one of them does not work. After hearing about the three organizations, have the participants vote on one that they think has little to no evidence of impact.

1. ***In order to prevent youth from getting involved in crime, one program takes them to prisons, and attempts to scare them. Prisoners offer testimony about how terrible their lives are behind bars. They tell frightening stories and offer a grim picture of what happens to people who commit crimes and are caught. The theory of change is that young people will be "scare straight." This program was so compelling that there was an Academy-Award winning documentary about its effectiveness.***

2. ***Another program, Project DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), is intended to show young people the dangers of drugs. Police officers teach young people in high schools about how drugs can destroy their lives.***

3. ***One of the major problems in the world is lack of access to safe clean drinking water. A social entrepreneur came up with a clear idea: He would create merry-***

go-rounds that children could play on, and as they turned, would pump water from the ground! These PlayPumps started to spread throughout many developing nations, and earned the support of billionaire philanthropists, as well as both Democrats and Republicans. Both the Bushes and the Clintons praised and promoted it. It was one of those rare programs that earned bipartisan support for being such an innovative solution to a seemingly intractable problem.

Let the students debate in small groups for 2 minutes about which one they think doesn't work, and why not. Then let them vote on each one so that the class has selected one program they believe didn't work.

Then you reveal the answer:

Studies of Scared Straight indicate that students who go through the program are actually **more likely** to end up in prison than other randomly selected young people who don't go through the program!

Ask participants why they think this is true. Why is the program ineffective? Why does it actually seem to be making the problem worse? Let them contribute a few ideas.

[One of the leading theories is because it labels young people with the identity of "bad kids" where they are being sent to jails, and they begin to see themselves as the type of at-risk youth who are destined for a life of crime. Another theory suggests that young people think the conditions in prison aren't so bad, or that this could never happen to them.]

Then surprise the participants by revealing that the second program, Project DARE, **also does not work**. Similar to Scared Straight, it received scathing reviews in studies showing that young people who were randomly selected to go through this anti-drug program were **more likely** to use and abuse drugs than other randomly selected students who didn't go through it!

Finally, reveal that the third program **also was a spectacular failure**, despite the many millions of dollars showered upon it. Often the PlayPumps broke and nobody knew how to repair them. In most places, children stopped using the PlayPumps because they didn't find them to be very fun.

The key lesson from this activity is to showcase that often a program may sound like it will have a great impact in theory. **But in real life, when we measure it, we find that it doesn't actually work.**

It is important in this section to highlight what kinds of evidence we need to see. **Differentiate between outputs and outcomes.** This is a crucial difference. It's one thing to say how many people a program has served. There are 900 PlayPumps across South Africa as of 2018. That's an output. But just because it has served so many people, is this evidence of real impact? What are the actual outcomes - the changes we actually wish to see in the world?
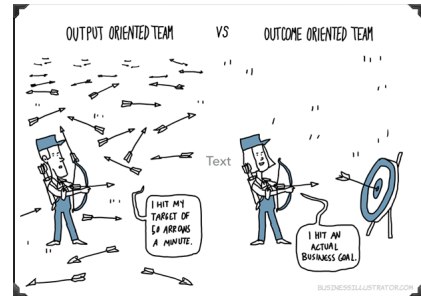
Part 3) Measuring Impact
Suggested time: 10 minutes

Ask the participants how we might measure impact. What kinds of evidence would we need to test whether a program actually works? As they offer suggestions, discuss the pros and cons and write their answers on a whiteboard or large flip chart paper.

Ways of Measuring Impact:

- **Randomized, double-blind studies with experimental and control groups -** This is the gold-standard. It is how drug manufacturers test whether cancer treatments and other potentially life-saving remedies actually work better than placebos. These randomized, controlled trials (RCT) are used increasingly in international development. They are difficult to do in many circumstances.

- **Testimonials** - While endorsements and support can appear impressive, it is important to remember, such as in the PlayPump example, that having endorsements from the Clinton and Bush families did not show that the program actually worked.

- **Anecdotes and case studies** - These can be useful to highlight inspirational stories; however, this doesn't necessarily mean that such story is representative of the entire population they serve.

- **Self-reports** - Such as a survey. This can be effective, but again, are subject to biases. Such as, discrepancy between what someone reports and what they actually do.

Part 4) Measuring the Impact of your Bonner Experience
Suggested time: 20-30 minutes

We just learned that organizations use various ways to demonstrate the impact of the program. This includes: testimonials / success stories on websites, report about # of people served (output), program annual report, program evaluation report (survey and interviews), and other studies. Now, let's look at your service sites, their programs, and ways in which you could make a difference.

Use the attached handout to present the following discussion questions:

A. What is your service site? What programs do they offer? What is your role within those programs?

B. What is the impact of these programs (output and outcomes)? What measures do your service sites use to demonstrate program impact?

C. If there is lack of data or if it could be improved, what options do you see to examine the program impact?

D. If there is a lack of data or other evidence of impact, what are the ways in which you could contribute to the program assessment?

E.g. Program revision based on feedback forms or initial survey, developing forms and/or survey, needs assessment, interviews with program participants, video testimonials (to demonstrate output)

Participants can answer individually, then discuss their findings pair share or in small groups. After about 15 minutes, use the remaining 2-5 minutes for a representative in each pair or small group to share with the entire group.

The point is for participants to analyze what it means for something to have real impact. What kinds of empirical data or evidence do they need to support their cases?

Be prepared that students may become dissatisfied with their educational status quo. The purpose of the activity is not to show that nonprofits and programs have little evidence of impact; however, it is quite revealing.

Conclusion: Share 2 to 3 examples of Bonner capacity-building projects and ask how they feel about developing a project (individual or team-based) to make a difference (in connection to the session title) in their service-site.

Part B

Part 5) Effective Altruism
Suggested time: 30 minutes

There are many ways to make impact (service, charity, lifestyle, advocacy), this next section will dive into one example of how to make an impact: effective altruism.

Watch the 15 minute TED Talk from Peter Singer, philosopher and leading thinker behind the effective altruism movement. He is also the author of the book, "The Most Good You Can Do." Singer touches on some provocative ideas in his talk. Spend the remaining 15 minutes discussing the pros and cons of effective altruism.

https://www.ted.com/talks/peter_singer_the_why_and_how_of_effective_altruism?language=en#t-123407

Thoughts to consider:

• Do you agree with Singer that it doesn't make a morally relevant difference the proximity of those in need?

• Do you agree with Singer that we are all complicit in the deaths of children, animals, etc., because they are lives that could be saved? Do we each have a moral obligation to do the most good we can?

• Given Singer's analysis, organizations like the Make a Wish Foundation that spend significants amount of money on one child aren't effective because the money could go to an organization that helps more people… do you agree with this?

• Should we always be directing our money towards the most disadvantaged groups? What about our own communities?

• What do you think about the strategy of working on Wall Street to earn a lot of money to donate to charity?

Part 6) Closing
Suggested time: 5 minutes

The discussion should come back together. Take a couple comments from the group asking them to reflect on what they learned/key takeaways from the session.

If time allows, the marshmallow challenge is an interactive activity for participants to experience an approach to discovering what makes the greatest good and maximum positive impact (spoiler: the best way to see if your theory of change is correct is to test it out in the real world).

Part 7) Marshmallow Challenge (Optional)
Suggested time: 35 minutes

Time: 5 minutes for the preparation and instructions; 18 minutes for the challenge; 12 minutes for the debrief.

Materials: Marshmallows, uncooked spaghetti sticks, scotch tape, string, scissors, and a measuring tape.

Divide the rooms into teams of four people each. Every team should get one marshmallow, one pair of scissors, 20 spaghetti sticks, a meter of tape, and a meter of string.

Tell the participants they have 18 minutes to build the tallest possible free-standing structure, using only the materials that have been given to them. There are a few rules:

- The marshmallow has to be on the top of the structure. In other words, they can't put the marshmallow on the bottom, as the base of their creation.
- They can't tear up the marshmallow into smaller sizes. They have to use the full marshmallow. They can however cut up/break the spaghetti sticks, the tape, or the string, if they wish.
- They can't tape the structure to the wall or tie a string to hold it up. It must stand on its own at the end of the 18 minutes.

Once every team has their materials, you can begin the 18-minute countdown. It often helps to project a countdown timer onto a screen. Playing music also adds to the energy and excitement of the activity. Announce milestones, for example at the 9 minute mark, "You have already used half of your time!"

At the end of the 18 minutes, call time and everyone must stop. You will go around and measure the height of each one that is still standing. Often, none are standing at the end of 18 minutes.

Then, debrief.

What went wrong? What went right?

Then provide a surprising fact: Ask them to guess which group of people consistently builds the tallest structures? **The answer: kindergarteners!** They consistently outperform students at Harvard Business School, other prestigious schools, and intelligent adults in the working world. *Why?*

Adults tend to spend much of their time planning and designing. This is normally helpful, but it backfires if some of the assumptions are wrong. For example, assuming the marshmallow is light and fluffy but when placed at the top of the structures, it comes toppling down. Young children, in contrast, will just start building their structures right away. They might discover in the first minute that the marshmallow is heavy. Therefore, they will try a second attempt, and third right away. They are constantly learning from their mistakes.

The point here is that the best way to see if your theory of change is correct is to test it out. To create the greatest good and maximize positive impact, we need to have lots of trials and experiments. To test out theories to see which ones have proof of impact. Once we know something works, we can pour resources into it. It's all about following the evidence!

Credits:

Developed in 2018 by Liz Brandt, Bonner Foundation Community Engagement Director.

Modeled from Solutions U Module Three: Measuring Impact and Module Four: Creating the Greatest Possible Impact.

https://solutionsu.solutionsjournalism.org

· Fiennes, Caroline and Reed, Ehren, "Moneyball Philanthropy? Not Always," Forbes, June 30th, 2014.
· Singer, Peter. "The Why and How of Effective Altruism," TED2013, March 2013.

Additional Readings & Resources

• Fiennes, C., & Reed, E. (2014, July 1). "Moneyball Philanthropy? Not Always." The article complicates effective altruism and moneyball philanthropy as effective strategies for systems-change work.
• Orr, David. "What Is Education For," Context Institute, 1991.

Analyzing the Impact of your Bonner Experience

A. What is your service site? What programs do they offer? What is your role within those programs?

B. What is the impact of these programs (output and outcomes)? What measures do your service sites use to demonstrate program impact?

C. If there is lack of data or if it could be improved, what options do you see to examine the program impact?

D. If there is a lack of data or other evidence of impact, what are the ways in which you could contribute to the program assessment?