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Service Learning: An Overview

Bolstered by federal and state policy and funding, and by the enthusiasm and creativity of educators, a wide variety of service-learning programs have been introduced in the United States. Beyond simply logging a required number of volunteer hours, service-learning integrates community service with learning objectives, engaging students in a continuous cycle of action and reflection. Well-designed service-learning programs reward communities with the direct service and talents of youth, and may also support indirect and far-reaching benefits such as reduced health risks and higher graduation rates. For young people, these programs offer the opportunity to develop a range of competencies, make meaningful connections to others, improve health and education outcomes—and experience their own power to make a positive difference. To achieve this kind of value, however, programs must be intentionally designed to meet specific goals, and they must offer a high degree of engagement, adult support, and structured opportunities for reflection on the experience. This article provides an overview of service-learning, including a summary of benefits to youth that effective programs may provide, and principles to guide the design of service-learning programs.

Examples of service-learning programs abound. A quick internet search finds first grade students researching, designing, implementing, and evaluating methods to stop kindergarteners from running in the halls (Billig, 2007); middle school students monitoring local water quality and lobbying local government for pollution control (Learning In Deed, n.d.); high school students researching incorporation of their region into a town, presenting their findings to the Chamber of Commerce, and creating educational materials for residents (Active Citizenship, n.d.).

The National Youth Leadership Council defines service-learning as "an educational method that involves students in challenging tasks that meet genuine community needs and requires the application of knowledge, skills, and systematic reflection on the experience." Service-learning is set apart from other educational methods by its focus on meeting community needs, and from other forms of community service by its educational objectives. Importantly, service-learning includes both action and reflection, and benefits both the recipient of service and the student providing the service (Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999); without these components a program may be valuable, but it does not fall under the rubric of service-learning.

Service-Learning in Action: Children for Children®

Children for Children (CFC) offers opportunities for young people in underserved New York City communities to "grow involved" through hands-on service and philanthropy programs. CFC provides Grow Involved kits to selected schools to help service-learning coordinators plan classroom-based youth service projects (call 212.759.1462 for more information). The CFC website also links to many service-learning resources: www.childrenforchildren.org

In concert with traditional curricular goals in science, math, social studies, etc., programs may involve direct service, in which students establish personal contact with people in need; indirect service, such as fundraising, research, or food drives; and advocacy, mobilizing community support for positive social change. Each type has demonstrated value depending on the objectives being measured: research and advocacy, for example, tend to yield positive academic outcomes, while direct service may lead to community attachment (RMC Research Corporation 2007b).

Benefits to Students

Service-learning programs may lead to a multitude of positive outcomes. Certainly not all programs provide all benefits. As Mary Agnes Hamilton and Stephen F. Hamilton emphasize (2004), programs must be designed with the intention of achieving certain outcomes if students are to realize these goals. Research on the impact of service-learning on students is summarized in a regularly updated fact sheet by RMC Research Corporation (2007a). The impacts that particular programs can make, as identified by RMC and others, include:

Academic gains and school connectedness. Research has begun to demonstrate that service-learning may lead to improvements in school attendance, attitudes toward school, analytic skills, grades, test scores, school climate, and more. Service-learning may also play a role in reducing the achievement gap (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005), and appears to offer an especially effective approach for those who struggle with school.

Civic engagement. When programs are expressly designed to increase civic engagement, service-learning is very effective in building civic competencies. When that outcome is not explicitly sought, service-learning in and of itself does not necessarily lead to positive civic outcomes.

Personal and social competencies. Personal and social development through service-learning was an early research interest and has been well-documented. Multiple studies have identified service-learning programs that build strengths such as responsibility, communication, self-esteem, independence, trust, empathy, ability to accept diverse individuals and cultures, and ethics and moral reasoning.

Social Capital. Service-learning gives students the chance to cultivate relationships that may help them achieve personal goals (Koliba, Campbell, & Shapiro, 2006).

Protective factors. In addition to increasing personal competencies, service-learning programs may increase the protective factors that foster resilience. RMC Research Corporation (2007a) cites studies that show, for example, stronger connection to heritage and positive peer bonding. Research has also demonstrated the efficacy of particular programs in decreasing school drop-out and risk behaviors such as substance abuse. Evidence that service-learning helps teens delay pregnancy is particularly strong, although the reason for this is not clear. Researcher Douglas Kirby (2007) speculates on a number of possibilities: more time spent under adult supervision, high quality relationships with adults, the sense of making a difference, development of greater autonomy and confidence, greater cognizance of the future.

Career exploration. Service-learning helps students explore options, build skills, and stimulate aspirations for future careers.

Principles of Effective Practice

It is widely agreed that these benefits are not automatic, and no single program should be expected to deliver all of these outcomes. However, research points to key elements that increase the effectiveness of service-learning, and practitioners are moving systematically toward setting professional standards based on that research. The process of setting standards, a collaborative effort described by The National Youth Leadership Council (Weah, 2007), will begin with Eight Principles of Effective Practice for K-12 Service-Learning:

Curriculum Integration. Service-learning enhances academic success when it has explicit learning objectives tied to classroom instruction.

Reflection. Providing opportunities to reflect has long been recognized as an essential element of service-learning. To fully realize the potential of reflection, these opportunities should be varied, should elicit deeper thinking, and should be ongoing.

Youth Voice. To optimize student engagement and learning, students should be meaningfully involved in every aspect of the service-learning project, as developmentally appropriate. Student leadership and input into planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation build competencies and self-esteem, deepen engagement, and improve relationships and connectedness with teachers, school, and community. Clear learning and service objectives are critical to success, but it is also important to allow for flexibility rather than adhering to a rigid program or curriculum (Stukas et al., 1999).

Respect for Diversity. Service is likely to bring diverse groups together, and explicitly teaching respect for diversity leads both to greater project effectiveness and greater social competencies for youth. Respect for diversity is also fostered when service is not a one-way street, but is mutually beneficial.

Meaningful Service. For engagment and learning to occur, students must feel that the problem to be addressed is significant and the service they provide is relevant and valuable. Choosing a service project that will have demonstrable impact is important so that students can see that their work makes a difference.

Progress and Process Monitoring. Is the program meeting its goals? Are the program's processes working to ensure learning? Collecting the data necessary to answer these questions provides new learning opportunities and leads to quality improvement.

Sufficient Duration. Community service, occasional volunteering, and short-term service-learning projects are all valuable; however, to achieve the breadth and depth of positive outcomes that service-learning potentially provides a serious commitment of at least a semester (or 70 hours) is needed.

Reciprocal Partnerships. To sustain service-learning, authentic partnerships between educators and community-based organizations should be developed with clear roles, ongoing communication, and shared vision.

For a more complete discussion of each of the principles above, including the research basis for each principle, see Shelley H. Billig's article *Unpacking What Works in Service-Learning:* http://www.nylc.org/rc_downloaddetail.cfm?emoid=14:704

Mentoring. Though not explicitly noted in the principles laid out by the National Youth Leadership Council, the development of adult mentors is also a promising avenue for increasing program quality. Hamilton et al. (2006) suggest that service-learning provides a rich context for natural mentoring. Their review of the literature indicates that within a well-designed program, natural mentoring may itself be a positive factor in a number of important outcome areas. A good mentor makes increasingly complex activity and learning possible, allowing greater autonomy over time while maintaining support and connection.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development mobilizes communities to create services, opportunities, and supports that enable young people to grow to their full potential. Because service-learning shares the positive youth development principles of youth voice, youth strengths, long-term commitment, collaboration across sectors, and focus on relationships, service-learning is a particularly powerful tool available to schools and communities that are committed to the positive youth development framework. Communities often struggle to break stereotypes that adults maintain about youth; service-learning focuses attention on the gifts young people have to offer the community, offering adults a positive (and news-worthy) perspective on youth. Community youth development initiatives may find that service-learning provides an avenue for strengthening connections between schools and other sectors. Above all, service-learning offers precisely the kind of challenging opportunities and supportive, connected environment that is called for by the positive youth development movement. ★

Where to Go for More Information

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse offers abundant resources, including summaries of the latest research, effective practices, funding opportunities, internet forums, and much more: http://www.servicelearning.org/resources/index.php

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