

From Service to Service Learning

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Of the five parts of America's Promise to Youth, four require something from the community: mentors, protection, healthy environments, and preparation of youth for marketable skills. Each involves adults doing something to nurture, prepare, and develop youth. The fifth part is different. It requires that youth do something: serve. Youth are expected to give back because they receive important help from their communities. Their service can take many forms and produce a range of results, from meeting simple, immediate needs to solving long-term social problems.

Community Service

Youth have many opportunities to give back to their communities. The most common is volunteering for community service—from tutoring children to helping the elderly. Many youth-serving organizations (Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H, Scouts, etc.) provide opportunities for young people to assist others, to solve problems, and to deliver real service. Recent studies show that American teens and young adults are volunteering at record rates. School-based community service is now offered in more than 80% of all high schools, and community service is mandated in many school districts across the country (Kleiner & Chapman, 1999).



Community service projects provide immediate, often short-term impact and frequently build on experiences youth already have.



Service Learning provides opportunities for youth to use newly acquired skills in real-life situations.

Community service is an effective mechanism to provide immediate, often short-term, impact. Youth usually engage in community service projects where work builds upon experiences they already have. Helping in a soup kitchen, participating in fundraising projects, and pushing wheelchairs in a residential center are examples of community service tasks that require little training or explanation.

Service Learning

Another form of service emerged in the last part of the 20th century. Notions of community service gracefully morphed into something called service learning, where learning is intimately connected to the act of service. Service is no longer an act of charity or noblesse oblige. It is not simply middle- and upper-class youth serving poor or disenfranchised members of society. Rather, it is an act of citizenship and growth, where the quality of service matters to both the server and the served.

What is service learning? While studies and literature summaries indicate it means many things

to many people (Shumer, 1993), some of the most common definitions describe it in these terms:

“ . . . service learning is both a program type and a philosophy of education. As a program type, service learning includes myriad ways that students can perform meaningful service—to their communities and to society while engaging in some form of reflection or study that is related to the service. As a philosophy of education, service learning reflects the belief that education must be linked to social responsibility and that the most effective learning is active and connected to experience in some meaningful way.” (Kendall, et. al, 1990)

It is also defined as a method:

- under which students learn and develop through active participation in . . . thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet critical community needs;
- that is integrated into the student’s academic curriculum or provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the service activity;
- that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities;
- that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring. (National and Community Service Act, 1990)

Together, these definitions describe a method and philosophy that combines community service with thoughtful reflection, is often connected to some formal curriculum, and is intended to help students develop skills and attitudes that lead to civic engagement and caring.

Service learning has been growing as a civic, educational youth movement for the past decade. In the mid-1980s, only 27% of U.S. high schools

Photo by Don Breneman



Service Learning and Youth Development

Service learning is a powerful form of community service because it embraces essential elements of healthy youth development. By including reflective components to process the community service activities, service learning ensures that intellectual development accompanies the service experience. Youth become better able to deliver good and appropriate service because they better understand what they are doing and how they can meet the needs of community. In terms of moral development, Piaget reminds us that youth need to be exposed to moral and power issues as they grow from constrained and adult dependent, to more cooperative, shared roles with adults. Service learning, more than community service, requires young people to interact with adults in a way that shows their knowledge, demonstrating to adults that they know about the service they are delivering. This provides self-confidence and self-definition as youth are able to interact with adults on a more equal footing.

Kohlberg (1979), another moral theorist, suggests that youth need to deal with moral dilemmas so they can move from self-centered to other-centered behavior. The service in service learning allows them to perform good deeds and to meet other's expectations—two important elements in moving from child to adult. To understand society's rules and needs, youth need to learn role-taking and empathy and then process their experiences. Service learning initiatives allow this to happen. Such learning occurs in community service programs, but there usually is no regular consistency of reflection and instruction to ensure that young people are really learning important moral messages from the service experience.

If we are encouraging youth to do service because we want them to be active citizens

offered community service and 9% offered service learning; by the late 1990s more than 80% offered community service and more than 50% offered service learning. Service learning had grown by over 3,600% during that time period, and much of that growth occurred since 1990 (Shumer & Cook, 1999).

Why the interest in service learning? There is renewed understanding that it is not enough to encourage community service and charity—giving to help another, less able (financially, socially, personally) individual. While improving conditions in the short term, community service and charity do little to affect the systemic issues that create the need. There is also little mutuality in volunteerism and community service—benefit flows primarily from the server to the served.

In a democracy, it is also important to provide young people with opportunities to learn to participate in civic life. If most people learn by doing (as John Dewey and other philosophers and educators believe), then young people need to act civically, and learn how to provide service in the context of living in communities. But experience, without reflection and learning, does not automatically lead to growth and long-term change for either server or those served.

when they grow up, then involving them in service learning is a potent way of doing it. Youth need to engage in civic acts and process them with reflective adults.

Service Learning and Youth Involvement

A new book, *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices* (Mann & Patrick, eds., 2000) describes the current state of student apathy toward civic involvement and government and explains why we need to reverse this trend by reconnecting youth with community. John Patrick, citing a report from the National Commission on Civic Renewal, explains that, “In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.” Stephen Bennett outlines the case of reduced civic engagement and knowledge on the part of youth, citing five studies that illustrate that America’s high school seniors “lack sufficient understanding of government to act intelligently as voters, . . . are woefully ignorant of United States history, and show continuing patterns of political disengagement and political apathy.” Additional chapters present our youth culture as rapidly growing into a world of passive, disengaged adults.

The good news is that the book also contains hopeful stories and examples of youth engaged in service learning and other promising practices, where young people are involved in service that makes a lasting difference. This suggests service can help get our society reengaged again, if young people focus on real, critical problems in our society.

In the book, Harry Boyte identifies the youth engagement program Public Achievement as a good example of school-based programs that encourage social problem solving. Usually connected with college/university mentors (called “coaches”) students select problems to

study and work on. Through informed and engaged service, students learn to perform public actions that address public problems. Students don’t just perform service, they provide service that is tied to critical understanding of social action in democratic settings. As Boyte explains, civic action is not a program, it is a craft, complete with skills, understanding, and actions. Civic action is both a state of mind and a set of skills—all connected to knowledge that is applied to specific issues.

Steven Chaffee, in his description of Kids Voting USA, explains how a curriculum that includes voting in the classroom, completing mock ballots at polling places, and planning

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community events leads to increased civic participation of youth. A 1994 study of a Kids Voting USA initiative in California showed significant knowledge of voting, candidates, and issues. Perhaps even more impressive (and related to the service dimension) was the measurable effect on parents. The intensity of student involvement with issues was paralleled by parents’ understanding of issues, party affiliation, and reported discussion of elections with others. What was particularly important in this increase was that students initiated conversations at home with their parents.

In another example, Herbert Atherton discusses We the People . . . Project Citizen. In this case-based, problem-oriented initiative, students learn how to affect public policy and

monitor its implementation. The focus of Project Citizen is a problem-based, student-driven approach to teaching and learning. Students identify the problems studied. Service is based on student analysis of public policies and their efforts to construct effective solutions.

Service Learning and 4-H

Many youth development programs that involve service learning are led by community groups and community agencies. Some of the best examples come from 4-H, one of the largest youth organizations in the country. In the book *Beyond 4-H Community Service to Community Service Learning* (1993), author Allan Smith explains how state and national 4-H leadership have endorsed the idea of service learning. He provides outlines, rubrics, and checklists to measure the kind of service learning that can occur in 4-H curriculum categories.

For example, the University of Illinois Extension program Walk in My Shoes (an outstanding effort to connect young people with older adults) shows how service and learning come together. As an online project, youth learn to deal with many of the issues facing older adults by reading lessons developed through web-based instruction. Once they have basic knowledge, they get input from older friends or family members, so they can share, learn, and understand one another. Youth engage in projects that require them to connect with older adults in ways that improve the quality of life for both. Walk in My Shoes is a good example of 4-H projects that lead to service learning.

In another program Free for Life: Youth Empowered to Be Tobacco Free (An Experiential Curriculum from National 4-H Council) youth are engaged in a series of lessons that require them to understand issues, use knowledge of tobacco to make decisions, and develop partnerships with adults to develop positive

strategies to promote tobacco prevention for life. In this model youth develop service strategies from their learning about tobacco and their need to have a positive influence on their peers and on society. Along with adults, Free for Life participants develop local initiatives that require them to study tobacco issues and to construct realistic programs to keep kids off cigarettes.

Service Learning and Citizenship

In addition to theories and programs that demonstrate that service learning can affect thought and change, research supports the notion that service, coupled with learning, has more impact than just service alone. One of the best places to study the impact of service learning is in Maryland, the only state to mandate service learning for high school graduation. Students are required to fulfill 75 hours of service learning during their three years in high school (although many of the experiences were primarily community service). In a 1995 study conducted by Marjorie Davidson, seniors in the first graduating class were interviewed about the program. The good news was that the service experiences raised the levels of awareness—high school seniors understood that there were many social problems to deal with in the future. The bad news was that while students learned about the importance of service, they did not connect the learning with civic action. They understood the need and importance of community work, but did not translate the experience into civic action—voting, participating in community activities, or other engaging processes. Davidson recommends that service learning programs be delivered through high school social studies courses, where students are more likely to make the conscious connection between service and citizenship.

This recommendation supports studies in higher education that show freshmen are volunteering more, yet voting less and feeling less interested in engaging in the body politic (Astin, et al, 1999). These trends suggest that promoting volunteerism, while well intentioned, does not automatically lead to either increased skills in civic participation or improved attitudes toward civic action. Rather, it suggests that programs such as service learning (and other community-connected learning programs that combine service and learning) are more effective, in the long run, at producing young people who truly understand what it means to give back to society.

Conclusion

Through initiatives such as America's Promise, society has made a covenant with our young people that we will guide them through the maturation process and provide them with the tools, skills, and attitudes to become productive, effective members of society. One of those promises is to help young people learn how to give back to their society. In doing so, we can encourage them to serve through community service, or we can develop service learning initiatives that teach them to become citizen servants. Through engagement of youth in the thoughtful development of service connected to reflection and learning, we can provide society with young people who will contribute and who will make a difference over the course of a lifetime.

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