

Harnessing the Trojan Horse: Future Directions in Service Learning

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Throughout the past decade, the practice of service learning has grown exponentially, reaching a level at which broad-based understanding and sustainability is now within reach. Never before have so many resources been directed to service learning practice nor have so many new allies (within and outside of formal education) understood and embraced service learning methods. There is opportunity for real change in work with young people. Taking full advantage of this unique opportunity requires education and research of how service learning works and whom it affects.

Advances in service learning cannot continue nor can recent gains be sustained without concurrent emphasis on documenting outcomes and shaping practice through high quality national and organizational research. A service learning summit convened in 1995 by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and organized by the Search Institute brought together researchers, funders, and practitioners of service learning from around the nation to establish an agenda for the future.

Summit participants agreed that the best strategy for advancing service learning is to “fund research and evaluation studies in the effects of various models of service learning,” (Blyth & Kroenke, 1996). Similar recommendations were made in “Research Agenda for Combining Service and Learning in the 1990s” (Giles et al., 1991) at a Wingspread Conference sponsored by the Johnson Foundation and the

National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE).

With service learning’s explosive growth has come public scrutiny, with questions like, How do we know it works? Are achievement, psychosocial development, and citizenship claims for students documented? Do assessment tools adequately measure outcomes? Before addressing these and other questions, it’s important to consider how service learning arrived at this historical moment and why careful research is key to further growth.

Service Learning Movement

The scope and power of the service learning movement is only beginning to be grasped. Prior to the 1990 National and Community Service Act, the primary supporters of service learning were experiential and informal educators—people who championed the work of John Dewey, Don Eberly, Jonathon Kozol, Kurt Hahn, Gisela Konopka, Mary Conway Kohler, Sequoiah, Robert Greenleaf, William Ramsey, James Coleman, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus of Nazareth, Alec Dickson, Gandhi, Robert Sigmon, and Paulo Friere, and others. Advocates read the *Synergist*, and clustered in the Association for Experiential Education (AEE), National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE), or Partnership for Service learning.

Until the early 1980s, service learning remained primarily a higher education issue. At

that point, research showing experiential education/service learning's effect on K-12 students was introduced (Conrad & Hedin, 1982; Boyer, 1983). Another factor in the broadened appeal of service learning was the conceptual link among service learning in schools, informal education organizations, and the emerging national service movement (Kielsmeier & Sorden, 1986; Parsons, 1986; Cairn & Kielsmeier, 1991). This link was integrated into programming through state initiatives in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Massachusetts, Maryland, and California, setting the stage for a major surge in service learning.

Service learning as an element of national service was introduced in the 1990 National and Community Service Act by Senators Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and David Durenberger (R-MN), and signed by President George Bush. This landmark legislation—crafted by Shirley Sagawa of Senator Kennedy's office—effectively redefined national service from a program to an inclusive education and youth development process that included service learning.

In 1992, Senators Harris Wofford (D-PA), Durenberger and Paul Wellstone (D-MN) introduced separate service learning legislation, ensuring the inclusion of service learning in the omnibus 1993 National and Community Service Act written by Kennedy and signed by President Bill Clinton. The legislation has since resulted in more than \$40 million of service learning grants each year for schools, community-based organizations, and higher education institutions. In 1995, more than 700,000 students participated in Corporation for National Service (CNS) Learn & Serve grants.

While service learning was gaining strides nationally, states continued to invest in their own service learning. In California, for example, Superintendent of Schools Delaine Eastin set the goal of service learning in every Califor-

nia school by 2004. In Minnesota, bolstered by state funds, participation of school-age students in service learning has grown from 30,000 in 1989 to more than 200,000 in 1997. In Maryland, a requirement of service hours for high school graduation has evolved into a statewide



Once restricted to higher education, service learning is now also applied to grades K-12.

service learning staff development model. This model, created by the Maryland Student Service Alliance, is used in every school district. Initiatives in Minnesota, South Carolina, Iowa, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Utah are being led by members of the National Community Education Association with support from the Mott Foundation.

The National Service Learning Cooperative, a technical assistance effort linking 14 regional partners and a clearinghouse at the University of Minnesota's Department of Work, Community and Family Education, was produced by CNS funding of the National Youth Leadership Council with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. The Co-op's primary audience is CNS Learn & Serve grantees. The clearinghouse and other partners have reported a huge demand for information and technical assistance services related to service learning (Weah et al., 1996).

Service Learning Advocates

In recent years, national service forces have been joined by other movements and spokespersons, providing additional resources and enthusiasm for the movement. Colleges have become strong proponents as service learning has been integrated through Campus Compact and Campus Outreach Opportunity League. At the same time, School-to-Work/School-to-Career advocates have introduced the idea of applied and community-based learning to new audiences, linking service learning to work-skill outcomes (CCSSO, 1995). Strong allies of service learning, character educators have noted that traits such as compassion, integrity, and honesty result from service learning practices. National education organizations also are beginning to acknowledge service learning as a school improvement strategy. The Association for Supervision, Curriculum and Development (ASCD), the National Community Education Association (NCEA), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) are all focusing on service



learning. Youth development professionals cite service learning as a successful means for fostering pro-social values, building on the idea that young people are valuable resources and community assets (Benson, 1991; National Crime Prevention Council, 1988).

In addition to other benefits of service learning, evidence suggests that when integrated across school curricula and youth development organizations, service learning acts as a catalyst to other organizational improvement strategies such as interdisciplinary instruction, constructivistic curriculum design, and block scheduling. The catalytic effect of service learning as a “sleeping giant” (Nathan & Kielsmeier, 1991) or “Trojan Horse” for education reform provides its advocates a compelling reason for pressing forward. Major youth organizations, including 4-H, YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Boy Scouts and Campfire, are advancing service by youth. Finally, advocates of active citizenry and a more civil society through strengthened citizenship practices (Rifkin, 1996) embrace elements of service learning as a means to these ends.

While service learning has grown, school improvement strategies recommended in the landmark 1983 “Nation at Risk” report have produced little widespread change in schools. Former California State Superintendent of Schools Bill Honig notes, “Most reform efforts are too generic and trivial, and don’t penetrate the culture of the school enough to make a difference in the classroom,” (Sizer, 1996). Theodore Sizer echoes Honig, indicating disappointment with the Coalition of Essential Schools and “how few schools have been able to break through,” (Sizer, 1996).

Service learning builds on the idea that young people are assets to their community.

Conclusion

There has never been a better time to introduce service learning as an element of national service and an effective way of teaching that is appropriate to every grade level. Readiness, if not demand, for school change is high. Experimentation in the form of charter schools is growing and school choice is gaining support. This support for active learning with a citizenship dimension is also ideal for youth development organizations such as 4-H to revise their methods and programming.

Increased activity alone will not sustain service learning. Education and youth establishments require solid research. The public should understand service learning as an effective way of achieving education and youth development

goals. At the same time, teachers and youth workers need to appreciate service learning as an effective teaching method, not a superficial add-on. Now that the Trojan Horse has revealed its strength, it is time to harness its full potential as a way to build young people as we build communities.

Founded at the University of Minnesota in 1983, the NYLC is a national nonprofit organization offering a variety of support services to schools and youth development organizations in the areas of youth development, youth leadership, and service learning. Contact NYLC at (612) 631-3672 or through the website: <http://www.nylc.org>.

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