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Death of a Dream Service-Learning: 1994-2010: A Historical Analysis by One of the Dreamers

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Introduction

This essay was written in 1994 to stimulate discussion about issues that I felt threatened the efforts of the service-learning community to effectively expand with high-quality programs. It was based on my observations as a person involved in providing professional development support to teachers and education professors.

— Don Hill, October 2005

Since it was first written in 1994, Don Hill's "Death of a Dream" has taken on a life of its own. By identifying potential pitfalls for the service-learning movement and incorporating them into a fictionalized history, Don has sparked many discussions and helped us to avoid those pitfalls. "Death of a Dream" is still being used as a conversation starter at conferences and throughout the service-learning movement.

Don wrote this while he was at the Service Learning 2000 Center at Stanford University, which has since merged with Youth Service California.

— Editor

1994

Interest in service-learning was spreading like wild flowers in early spring. Stories of young people applying classroom learning to real problems stirred body and soul. Government, foundation, and corporate money seeded service-learning projects across the land. Schools were starting to dump rust encrusted schedules and provide blocks of time to enable students to get out and serve in the community during the regular school day. Teachers and community agencies were reaching out to each other and forming a maze of promising collaborations. Service-learning was nudging fundamental school reform. We felt we were really on to something!

2010

Service-learning is now unofficially dead. You can still find traces in scattered classrooms, but it has followed in the footsteps of so many other promising reforms in the history of American education. How sad now to recall those wonderful moments of hope and commitment. Where did we go wrong? Were our dreams hopelessly naive from day one? Does the ebb and flow of American political life doom efforts to really change schools? Were we nothing more than Don Quixotes tilting with windmills?

Looking Backward
May 1, 2010

I remember a colleague at Stanford University, Professor Larry Cuban, cautioning in 1994 that service-learning will remain on the educational periphery unless it becomes thoroughly embedded in the regular school curriculum. History has sadly proved him right. But why did service-learning not make it inside classroom doors to stay?

I had explored that question for two years, 2008-2010, by reviewing research and talking with hundreds of people who were involved in service-learning from different areas of the country and in different roles. It may be too close in time to make a valid historical judgment, but I believe it may be useful to share the general conclusions suggested by my research. The evidence that I collected suggests that service-learning made only a tiny, momentary dent in the schools and communities of America for 11 distinct but related reasons:

1. Service-learning never became an appealing or possible classroom strategy to "mainstream" teachers. Most models that were developed and publicized stressed a level of talent, time commitment, and professional risk that enticed only the most self-confident and dedicated. Most teachers, faced with persistent problems of large class size, disruptive student behavior, and accelerating public criticism, never opted to experiment with service-learning. Service-learning looked and smelled like an add-on fad that would in all due time pass from the scene. Even teachers who were intrigued and tempted to become involved hesitated because they worried about finding time to build curriculum connections that would enhance student learning.

2. Service-learning remained an ambiguous or fuzzy concept to the majority of teachers. In order to meet political pressures to allocate government and foundation money to a wide variety of eager schools, the definition of service-learning was commonly broadened to the point where almost anything could fit. Service-learning, by becoming everything, became almost nothing.

In addition, people in the movement argued incessantly about what term to use. Community service, community-based service-learning, voluntary service, and service-learning were among many terms that competed for awareness and acceptance. Scholars even wrote seriously about the merits of service-learning with a hyphen as opposed to service-learning without a hyphen. While people inside the movement debated the merits of different terms, people at large remained confused, uninformed, or turned off.

3. Service-learning success stories were almost always individual teacher success stories. Schools once known widely for exceptional service-learning classes stopped offering service-learning when individual teachers left the school or "burned out" and became "normal" teachers.

4. Plans to create a system for effective service-learning teachers to share their knowledge and experience with colleagues never really jelled. For example, promising efforts in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and California in the nineties to create widespread coaching support for teachers gradually fizzled due to lack of financial and philosophical support, while effective models were undeveloped in other states.

5. Service-learning grew too quickly. Viewed by many as a productive and creative strategy for promoting active student learning, it promised too much for too little. Many school districts, heavily influenced by the sudden influx of government funding, imposed service-learning programs on teachers without recognizing what was really required to build and sustain a quality program. As a result, they did not provide adequate preparation or offer staff development to help teachers imbed service-learning in the core curriculum. Teachers, with little understanding or commitment, started service-learning programs on demand that predictably faltered or failed. Students in these programs reported accurately that service had little or nothing to do with classroom learning and was, therefore, a waste of time. As a result, parents, teachers, and students worked together in a number of communities to push for the elimination of service-learning on grounds that it was a frill that undercut the basic educational program. When government funding started to decrease at the end of President Clinton's second term, districts found it increasingly difficult to justify its maintenance.

6. Service-learning moved from being a non-political, school community reform to a partisan, ideological battleground. Conservative leaders began to sound the alarm in the mid-nineties when evidence began to demonstrate that service-learning was hardly a benign movement to encourage volunteering and improve education. Students under the guise of service-learning were actively spotlighting economic and social inequities, and questioning the values and practices of some business interests. It was fine for schools to raise funds to buy food for the homeless, but it certainly was not the business of schools

to advocate social justice. Many districts, fearful of conservative criticism of student activism, reacted by gradually phasing out all service-learning.

7. Many service-learning programs began as partnerships seeking to connect organizations that were previously separate. Few, however, went much beyond being partners in name and money. Dreams of effective collaboration too often turned into awkward nightmares. Lack of quality planning time and poor communication skills were viewed as crippling barriers to success. Many teachers and community people turned out to be ill equipped to deal well with each other. Partnerships were often dominated by school people who looked on agencies only as places to send students. Although reflection was viewed as a fundamental component of service-learning, community agencies were rarely invited to participate or help shape the process. Good intentions were often undercut by conflict over insurance liability and turf.

Similar efforts of K-12 educators and teacher-training educators to create partnerships proved to be sporadic and inconsequential. Because teacher-training institutions generally viewed service-learning as an add-on to already overloaded curriculum or a strategy more appropriate for experienced teachers, they seldom gave it more than a comment in passing or an isolated reading assignment. Visionary efforts by some school districts to collaborate on training of teachers for service-learning often failed because few teacher-training institutions had faculty who were both informed and interested.

8. Service-learning never shook its image as a largely white, middle class movement. People began talking about the need to become more multicultural in the early nineties, but little was ever done. People of color rarely were selected for positions of leadership. This failure had two important consequences: Service-learning never got a strong toehold in the urban schools, a place where it had real potential to flourish. Service-learning also kept an Anglo bias that clashed with the values of other cultures rather than being enriched by them. Although it once looked like it might help bridge differences among people, service-learning actually became a symbol and perpetuator of cultural barriers.

9. There was a destructive conflict between policy-expectation timelines and school-change timelines. Service-learning was a teaching pedagogy that took a lot of time to learn and develop well. Sustainable service-learning programs required major changes in behavior and institutional culture at the school and district level. Research confirms that this kind of organizational and personal change requires at least five years of development to produce significant results. State and national policy makers and leaders ignored this perspective, however, and pressed for concrete results such as improved school grades in one or two years. Policy-makers also pushed hard for educators to expand school programs to district-wide scale before even pioneering schools had achieved high levels of quality.

Many service-learning teachers felt that these “top-down” policy-makers were out of touch with classroom realities. Some of the best teachers in the nineties burned out trying to achieve impossible policy expectations and then retired to the sidelines to watch as service-learning gradually withered away.

10. The Corporation for National Service built its political agenda on the AmeriCorps program, which was sometimes managed poorly and appeared to the person on the street to be very expensive. For reasons difficult to grasp, President Clinton and his political advisors at the Corporation for National Service and the Department of Education failed to recognize that the Learn and Serve America program engaged thousands more Americans and was dramatically more cost effective. Why the Corporation for National Service treated Learn and Serve America almost as a stepchild was especially baffling because it seemed to offer a more promising common ground for conservatives and liberals. Political commentators at the time suggested that President Clinton never really grasped the political potential of service-learning while he passionately yearned to make AmeriCorps mirror the excitement that President Kennedy had achieved with the Peace Corps.

I end this painful probe of the death of the service-learning dream with a gnawing question: If service-learning leaders in the 1990s knew what we know today in 2010, could they have created a different story?

Responses to "Death of a Dream"
After the original draft was circulated, responses were gathered, and are included in this document to further the debate and discussion.

The first response is by Larry Cuban, Professor of Education at Stanford University who has studied the effects of school reform efforts for many years. He is the co-author of "Tinkering Toward Utopia."

Service-learning fed into the late-1980s/early-1990s surge of interest in experiential learning, but it did not adapt to the switch to academic achievement and standardized test scores in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Policy-makers bear the burden of the demise of service-learning for not considering how service-learning is to be implemented, toward what ends, and allocating the resources to carry out the tasks. It was DOA.

The second response is by Louise Giugliano, a national school and professional development consultant.

Despite extraordinary efforts to promote service-learning in hundreds of thousands of classrooms in this country, the returns did not meet the efforts. Here is my assessment, which supports, complements, and takes on different issues than "Death of a Dream."

Why has service-learning struggled so when there was so much attention, money, well-meaning people involved, great experience, etc.? Focusing on the downside, I see the following:

•The "service-learning movement" was led primarily by politicians, not educators. This partly accounts for the lack of a real understanding of service-learning as a teaching and learning strategy. It also may account for too much emphasis on image over substance due to the lack of expertise among the political insiders.

• Service-learning was spoken of as surreptitious educational reform. Purportedly it would change one's teaching practice without anyone realizing that change was taking place. It is both unfair and naïve to suggest that service-learning "creates" educational reform, a commitment which requires considerable intention on the part of a school community and incredibly hard work. And, in truth, rather than creating reform, it is very hard to "do" service-learning in very traditional settings no matter how hard an individual teacher tries. There are many institutional barriers from rigid schedules to an enslaving curriculum.

•Service-learning did not model reform practice. Some promoters created service-learning "workbooks" and led professional development sessions as dog and pony shows or "how to" sessions, which are not reform practices. This caused teachers who

understand reform to look askance at service-learning as a respectable educational practice.

• Government and foundations rewarded the work done at scale rather than the work done deeply. [They often chose to support] who promised the "billion hours served" (of McDonalds notoriety) rather than support fewer programs that were willing to go deeper and really understand what this approach to education might look like.

• Schools in desperate need of money saw service-learning grants as an opportunity to finance computers for reflection journals and video cameras to catch children on-site, only to submit the video as part of their request for refunding This did not help to develop student-centered outcomes.

• Community partners came together like arranged marriages. With all the trappings of this cultural phenomenon: awkwardness, hesitation, and a desire to get on with the relationship and make the best of it, it did not lend itself to sustainable collaborations. Not enough was done to understand what a good relationship would mean and how to sustain it.

• And perhaps most importantly, regular reflection was expected only of children.

There is more, but what's the point unless we are willing to do what we have asked the children to do and that is to know what our goals are, act, reflect and make changes when we are off course. While there are plenty of examples that belie these criticisms, there is far too much truth in these statements to take them lightly.

The good news is that service has gotten the national attention and discourse that it so rightly deserves. There is no question that we have gained considerably by putting service and the debate about citizenship squarely front and center. Yet while making inroads, we have scarred the landscape. We now need to engage in real civil discourse, as good citizens, about what we have done with this movement. Perhaps then maybe we will avoid the demise that Don Hill so rightly brings to our attention now.

The third response is from Jim Kielsmeier, President and CEO of the National Youth Leadership Council.

"The greatest enemy of the best is the better."

We need to be leery of making it possible to stop short of what we know is exemplary service-learning.

The way an idea becomes reality is the way people surround the idea. We want diversity of experience and background. The great dilemma is how do we make service-learning inclusive — not be exclusive — and still sustain high standards.

Lots of people want to pull service-learning away from formal education. The push for just having kids log the hours of volunteer service will grow unless we are vigilant. Logging in hours is much easier. It eliminates the necessity of asking serious questions about the impact of service on instruction. Allowing the log-in strategy to dominate will also mute the impact of service-learning, will keep it from being a tool of school improvement and engaged learning.

There is a tremendous need for capacity-building at the teacher education level. We need more people at the colleges of education making conceptual contributions. We need to keep pressures on researchers to do formative research. We need thoughtful university professors working shoulder-to-shoulder with practitioners.

Issues that Arise from "Death of a Dream" and Responses

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2. Service-learning remained an ambiguous or fuzzy concept to the majority of teachers.

3. Service-learning success stories were almost always individual teacher success stories.

4. Plans to create a system for effective service-learning teachers to share their knowledge and experience with colleagues never really jelled.

5. Service-learning grew too quickly.

6. Service-learning moved form being non-political, school community reform to a partisan, ideological battleground.

7. Many service-learning programs began as partnerships seeking to connect organizations that were previously separate. Few, however, went much beyond being partners in name and money.

8. Service-learning never shook its image as a largely white, middle class movement.

9. There was a destructive conflict between policy expectation timelines and school change timelines.

10. The Corporation for National Service built its political agenda on the AmeriCorps program, which was sometimes managed poorly and appeared to the person on the street to be very expensive.

11. Policy-makers failed to allocate adequate resources for effective service-learning implementation.

12. Service-learning failed to adapt to the emphasis on academic achievement and standard test scores that developed in the late nineties and early twenty-first century.

13. Service-learning did not model effective professional development and school reform practice.

14. Government and foundation support emphasized superficial expansion rather than in-depth excellence.