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Students' Reflections on Community Service Learning

JAY D. ANDERSON

Internships are a rapidly expanding educational technique to enhance students' ability to learn. Internships permit and encourage students to experience the real world while receiving academic credit. Seekonk High School in Seekonk, Massachusetts, has an internship program for high school seniors called Independent Study. It allows students to leave school one day a week for the school year and volunteer within the community. Students receive academic credit for their participation in community service learning.

Seekonk's program follows the educational principle that people learn best by doing. The program is voluntary and students make their own explorations and decisions. They do not learn by memorizing a set of facts, but learn to give of themselves. Participants often soon realize that it is all right to have feelings and to act upon them and that some of the best experiences one has in life must be felt with the heart.

Knowing and clarifying our values is an endless process. It is challenging, but rewarding. When we begin to know our values, we become more productive and purposeful. We know what is important to us and we feel a zest for what we do. We often learn that life is precious and is worth the effort of living it to the maximum. We hopefully learn more consideration for our fellow human beings.

Internships also assist people in their decisionmaking. Through practical experience, we learn to make choices that are honest and valuable to our own needs. We learn to act with conviction and give ourselves permission to do what is important to us. High school seniors are at one of the most important decisionmaking points in their lives. They are trying to decide where they want to go with their future. Practical experiences through internships give invaluable help in this process.

REFLECTION COMPONENT

Seekonk students are required to keep a journal of their volunteer experiences. This journal is to reflect on the inner feelings of participants and should focus on the essence of their experiences. Entries should speak from the gut-level.

Journal writing directs our attention inward. We begin to nurture our true self and to let our feelings and comments come forward in words. We learn there are not right or wrong answers to our feelings. Instead, we begin to state what is important to us. Students are given examples of journal writing performed by previous students. These examples are filled with reflections of the mental, emotional, and imagery happenings that take place within all of us. The entries are alive and reveal what the writers were experiencing and feeling.

Students are instructed to take 30 minutes to reflect upon what they did on each day of their internship. Some of the areas they are asked to respond to are:

- Describe what you did today at your internship site.
- What did you enjoy doing at your internship?
- What did you avoid doing?
- How did you feel about yourself and what you did?
- What did you learn about yourself or others?
- What events do you specifically remember?
- What patterns are forming through your experiences?
- Comment upon any other feelings that you have.

Students are reminded to write from their feelings. They are not to be concerned about grammar, spelling, and so forth but are to write about their inner thoughts.

Some students initially find journal writing to be difficult. They are not used to writing about what has meaning to them. Many have been conditioned that educational success is based on telling teachers what they want to hear. As time progresses, however, students learn to be true to themselves.

REFLECTION DAY

One of the highlights of the Independent Study Program is known as Reflection Day. It occurs at the end of the school year and brings all the students who have performed internships together for an all day meeting. Typically 40% of the senior class have participated in the

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program but have not previously met as a single group. This is a time to bring everyone together.

The day features a series of activities designed to have students reflect on what they have done for the past year, while also listening to others' reflections. It is a special time when students honestly share of themselves and their feelings, and their feelings of accomplishment, happiness, and sadness. The day is a moving and emotional experience. Students begin to share tears, laughter, and hopes with their fellow students. The day takes on meaning, as honesty and candor prevail. It is an emotional and spiritual happening.

REFLECTION EXAMPLES

Amy Zimmerman, a Seekonk student, reflected on an important and sad experience during her internship at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island.

As I peered into the dimly lit room, my heart nearly skipped a beat. Helplessly propped by pillows lay Carlos. The normal gurgles of a thirteen-month-old baby were drowned by numerous monitor beeps. I observed his skin discoloration and immobility. Being my first encounter with patients, Carlos's condition left me saddened and shaken.

However, this was only the beginning of my experience with children at Hasbro Children's Hospital. As part of an Independent Study program, I leave school one day a week to volunteer in Child Life Services on the hospital's infant and toddler ward. Child Life strives to ease the health care experience for children and keep them developing at a normal rate. My original intentions were to spend the length of a school day at the hospital, but I rarely find myself leaving before five o'clock in the evening. Although this day often leaves me exhausted, I always leave with a sense of fulfillment.

As the only high school intern on the hospital floor, I have learned a great deal about children's health care through nurses, graduate students, and my own personal interaction with the patients. I have found that each day spent at the hospital brings a new awareness of the difference I can make for these children. As my first direct patient, Carlos served as my stepping stone into the lives of each individual child.

The following week brought an opportunity to individually work with Carlos. My previous uneasiness was instantly replaced by confidence as I eagerly learned how to hold and entertain my new friend. What followed in the next few hours was an incredible experience that will forever be etched in my memory.

Carlos suffered from a liver disease which frequently fluctuated. At this point, this once sickly child was filled with unbelievable energy. The spirit radiating from his eyes had captured me as well as a number of fellow interns in the playroom. I encouraged him to stay in a sitting position for his play in order to strengthen his weakening body. He attempted many new activities and

vented his frustration by furiously knocking down our creatively built Lego houses. The final victory of the afternoon came at his successful verbalization of a cat puzzle we had put together.

It was both my pleasure and responsibility to keep track of Carlos's weekly progress. Then one week Carlos did not look himself. I could see his extreme decline in health from that vibrant child that I had played with in the playroom weeks before. As the day went on, I felt an emptiness because of the uncertain future for Carlos. Before I left the hospital that afternoon, I looked into his room with tears in my eyes and said my own private good-bye. I knew this would be my last opportunity to see Carlos. Yesterday, Carlos died.

Although my advisor had attempted to prepare me for Carlos's death, losing such a young patient was horrible for me to accept. I have since learned the importance of setting realistic emotional boundaries with patients. I was finally able to let Carlos go, knowing that I had been a part of his life and feeling that he had smiled an extra smile because of me.

I'll forever envision Carlos joyously clapping to his music. Without knowing it, Carlos had taught me a great deal about myself and hospitalized children. Despite the sadness I encounter each week, I return the next leaving that sadness overshadowed by the silent joy I see in each baby's eyes. I thoroughly enjoy my time spent volunteering because I know that each smile, gentle word, and ounce of compassion I put forth is appreciated and loved.

It is fitting that my career aspirations coincide with my personal goals. Therefore, the benefits of my work will be greater considering that I shall not only be helping others but also myself. Through my internship at Hasbro Children's Hospital, I have realized my strengths working in a health care setting. I have felt the difficulties stemming from children's disabilities and also the triumph in their accomplishments. Finally, I have found the hope that the children carry for their own lives is easily transferred into my life making a career in health care most rewarding.

Nancy Antonio, who spoke at the 1994 Annual New England Community Service Learning Conference, shared the following thoughts:

One highlight of my senior year is working with ill children at Hasbro Children's Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island. This volunteer experience has brought out more in me than I could ever imagine. I have learned to care by feeling empathy for someone rather than sympathy. I have also seen how quickly a young life can be taken away. A young friend of mine, Joe, recently lost his fight to cancer. His long battle against this disease was one I shall never forget. I have never lost anyone close to me. The tears I cry and the pain I feel are so new to me. Joe has become my inspiration. He has shown me the strength that can be found within oneself. He has taught me to believe, when others don't.

This year alone, I have grown in many ways. For the first time I feel unbelievably mature and confident. I am determined. I can conquer most anything! I have a new passion for life that I have never felt before. I have found myself. I know who I am and am happy with that person. I am not influenced or pressured by anyone. I now see that I am the sole controller of my destiny and this gives me unlimited possibilities for the future.

Seekonk senior, Amy Arters, also spoke about her experiences and assessed their value to her education:

One of the most significant events of my high school career has been participating in the Independent Study program offered at Seekonk High School. The primary mission of this program is to allow students to experience the excitement, involvement, and personal growth of volunteerism. The community serves as a classroom, as seniors are allowed to leave school one day a week and volunteer in a variety of community agencies.

Since September, I have been volunteering once a week at Meeting Street School, an Easter Seals school for disabled children. I work in an adaptive physical education program and interact directly with the students. The students are between the ages of 5 and 21 and the majority of them have cerebral palsy. Taking part in this program has been a great opportunity to get hands-on experience working with challenged students.

Spending Tuesdays at Meeting Street has become the highlight of my week. Since I started, there are many things I have learned such as handling and lifting the students, building up their confidence, and having patience. Caring also plays a big factor when working with special needs students. To me, this means not taking pity but pushing them to be the best they can. I have found all of these things very important when working with the students. Every time I leave the school I have a sense of accomplishment because I know that for everything I gave out, the students gave back, and more.

There is one incident that stands out clearly in my mind. I was pushing Billy, a 10-year-old boy, on the bike when he suddenly told me to stop. Not knowing what was wrong, I stopped. Billy told me several times to let go of the bike because he wanted to try it himself, so I finally gave in. I stood in front of him with my hands on the handle bars to guide him and gave it a little pull—he peddled one and a half rotations by himself. To some this may seem like a small accomplishment but for Billy this was a big step. Seeing the smile on his face was probably one of the greatest rewards I have received. I was very proud of him and it made me feel very special to be there with him when it happened. He showed me that with hard work and determination you can do anything. Since that day Billy has made much progress and is now able to do up to 15 rotations on his own.

The satisfaction I have gotten from working with Billy and the other students at Meeting Street is much greater than any grade I could earn in a regular class. Helping others matters a great deal to me and makes me feel like I can make a difference in someone's life.

Alissa Souza also volunteered at Meeting Street School in East Providence and she offered her reflections:

Early this past November I had an experience that had a great impact on me. I started my independent study at Meeting Street School, a school for children with cerebral palsy and other special needs. I chose to volunteer in the physical education program because for every volunteer another child could go swimming or bowling, and I thought it would make me feel good just to know that I made one child's day brighter.

My first day of volunteering when I walked through the door I was totally excited about everything that I was going to face. I knew that the majority of the kids I would be dealing with were confined to wheelchairs due to cerebral palsy.

One thing that impressed me the most was the determination that I saw in one boy, named Fernando, a paraplegic born with a broken neck. He has a permanent oxygen tube hooked to his throat that helps him breathe. During his gym class we were playing a rendition of a baseball game for the kids, when it was Fernando's turn up at bat, I saw something amazing to me. Fernando can't swing the bat with his arms to hit the ball off the tee. Instead he had to shrug his shoulders as fast and as hard as he possibly can. Although it is frustrating to him he doesn't give up. We all were cheering for him. "Shrug hard! Shrug hard!" With that motivation Fernando knocked that ball off the tee with enormous pride on his face as he was wheeled around the bases.

At that moment I actually felt guilty for being as fortunate as I am. I definitely wasn't prepared for that feeling. I guess I was basically just prepared for the physical appearance of the kids in the wheel chairs but not for the determination that Fernando had and the realization that I would have given up. I also realized that it takes so little to make these students happy but it requires a lot of hard work.

Another student, Aaron Shield, talked about the deep emotional experiences he had when volunteering at the Aids Action Committee in Boston, Massachusetts:

I feel a general need to be involved in helping others, particularly those who have things worse than what I experience. I volunteered to continually remind myself of the blessings which I have. I developed a sense of satisfaction and being a part of a wonderful cause.

Meanwhile, we can learn from adversity. This year I have been confronted with the reality of death. But because of this, I have a better understanding of what it is to be alive. Being conscious of your mortality does not mean you have to be depressed about it. Rather, it makes you value everything more. Knowing that our lives are finite makes each day more meaningful.

The above examples show how deeply internships can affect the students. They tell us what students felt and learned about themselves as they volunteered.

These students have begun to look closely at themselves and to consider what education is really all about. They recognize how they are growing and changing.

Education has the potential of being alive and exciting. Students want and need new ways in which to learn. Differing styles of learning and a variety of internships, coupled with reflection, provide the opportunity for some real impact. Students want to feel important and that what they are doing is making a difference. Community service learning through student internships has made this difference.

Note

For more information on this program, see " 'Leave School and Learn:' Seekonk High School's Independent Study Program," also contributed by Dr. Anderson, in *Equity & Excellence in Education*, volume 26, number 2.

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