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Rich Cairn

Susan Cairn

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Service Learning Makes the Grade

Connecting service learning to specific standards presents challenges for educators. In Minnesota, teachers and students are pioneering assessments that effectively evaluate performance in light of learning goals.



the same time, they get real-world feedback on their work from professionals, for example, in Nathan's case, from Wayne Allen of the Nicollet County Historical Society and Mike Scullen from Mankato State University. Yet identifying the specific curricular learnings from a project and assigning a formal grade are challenges for teachers. Schneidawind and other Minnesota teachers who use service learning are pioneering methods of performance-based assessment to meet this additional challenge.

Schneidawind's students planted their gardens on the grounds of a center that commemorate an 1851 treaty between the U.S. government and the Dakota people.

Students experienced two

How can students recognize the quality of their work? Nathan Vetter, an 8th grader at St. Peter Junior High School in St. Peter, Minnesota, participated in a service learning project for Kirk Schneidawind's American history class. The class project was to recreate historically accurate European immigrant and Native American gardens for the Nicollet County Historical Society. The project held added importance because students planted rare Native American seed stock to help replenish Mankato State University's genetic bank.

What did Nathan learn? Nathan himself observed, "I get to know I did a good job by the effort I put into the garden, and by how good of a crop came out." Such a response is typical from someone involved in service learning, where students apply classroom learning while providing genuine community service. At

radically different sets of cultural practice. Neat, orderly European gardens follow straight lines, whereas Dakota corn, bean, and squash hills conform to a complex symbolism. Students constructed and used deer antler rakes and shoulder bone plows, and they also used European-style steel implements.

Students compared and contrasted these cultures on the basis of personal experience rather than on textbooks alone. Student drawings and journal entries predicted what the garden would look like. Later drawings showed how the reality of the garden differed from the predictions. Students effectively examined such questions as "What do their gardens explain about how these peoples approached one another?" and "How does the experience call into question common stereotypes of pioneers and Indians?" Such work demands the application of high-level thinking and organizational

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skills. Students experienced the work of historians as they learned the facts of history.

One of Schneidawind's many challenges was to choose pieces to assess from among the wealth of evidence produced by students. Ultimately, he had students create portfolios that included site maps, drawings, journals, and research reports on historical gardening practices. A checklist identifying the steps in the project helped. He noted,

What is neat about the checklist is that the kids know what is expected. They know that the more active they are, the more involved they are, the better they're going to perform.

Meeting Minnesota's New High Standards

Recognizing the importance of assessment for service learning programs, the Corporation for National Service funded a three-year effort by the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning to strengthen teacher practice in assessing what students are learning from service projects. St. Peter was one of 23 participating school districts.

Service learning practitioners are among the most enthusiastic supporters of Minnesota's new graduation standards because the new standards require what they have always considered to be good teaching.

The project took on added importance in light of Minnesota's shift to performance-based standards. In addition to passing basic level statewide math and reading tests, students face new High Standards that require them not only to know information and concepts but also to apply them in real-life settings. To graduate from high school, beginning with the class of 2002, each student must fulfill at least 24 of 64 standards. Students must also meet preparatory standards in the primary, intermediate, and middle grades. Ultimately, each student receives a final achievement rating on a four-point scale for each standard.

Teachers and students may use

service learning experiences to demonstrate achievement of any of the 64 High Standards. In fact, service learning is a particularly strong example of performance-based learning. For example, child-development students help out at day care centers, then complete a "case study" on this field experience, thereby meeting one of the standards. Many students meet standards in biological and chemical experimentation by collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on stream-water quality for resource management agencies. One of the most interesting examples of using service experiences to fulfill standards is the widespread alignment of the "community interaction" standard with community service learning courses.

Community Interaction

Nearly 100 Minnesota secondary schools currently offer community service learning courses. Typically, students spend one or two periods each day, three or four days a week, at service placements. Placements include day care centers, nursing homes, hospitals, Head Start programs, English as a

Second Language programs, hospices, schools, and programs for people with disabilities. One or two days a week, students participate in class discussions and training on such topics as learning styles, discipline for young children, or Alzheimer's disease.

The power of these programs results from students' face-to-face service. Students serve more than 100 hours and truly get to know people in a variety of life situations.

Assessment methods for courses include journal writing, self-assessment, research papers, observation during site visits by the instructor, and evaluation of performance by agency supervisors. Journals are the most common form of

assessment. Depending upon course goals, instructors may weigh the relevance of journal entries, the quality of writing, the accuracy of observations, the depth of understanding of the host agency, and the student's ability to reflect on and improve his or her performance. Agency site supervisors assess student performance by using a checklist provided by instructors. Supervisors rank items that include "Student established good rapport with clients and staff" and "Student's service has allowed the staff to do things they would not have been able to do otherwise."

Such a rich experience enables students to meet any number of the Minnesota Graduation Standards. Yet most districts use the community service learning course to fulfill the "community interaction" standard, which reads:

A student shall demonstrate an understanding of the relationships between organizations and the communities the organizations serve through direct service or experience, by:

A. assessing and evaluating the impact of an issue, event, or service on a target population; and

B. suggesting, applying, and evaluating strategies designed to improve the community through direct service or other authentic experience. (Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning, 1998)

Assessing a Service Learning Course

For more than 20 years, Craig Sheets has taught a community service learning course called the Community Awareness Program (CAP) at John Marshall High School in Rochester, Minnesota. This year he aligned CAP with the state standards so that his students may fulfill the "community interaction" standard by completing four assignments. Students must

1. select a community service project and prioritize personal options;
2. create and carry out a service plan for a selected agency;
3. keep a daily journal throughout the service placement to demonstrate understanding of the ramifications of community services on specific populations; and



Photograph courtesy of Kirk Schneidawind

Students at St. Peter, Minnesota, Junior High School prepare garden rows as part of their service learning projects.

4. complete a self-assessment of SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills [SCANS], 1991) skills applied in the course.

Both Sheets and his students use a checklist to assess the four assignments. For example, the checklist for assessing a student's action plan asks whether the student clearly stated his or her reasons for choosing the agency, defined the population to be served, delineated steps to accomplish goals that are attainable, justified conclusions with relevant data, and created a realistic time line.

Sheets helped other Rochester teachers align their courses with the standards. Many had to make dramatic changes in the way they taught. Yet Sheets reported, "Of all the classes I've helped align with the standards, the CAP class had the most components of the standard already in place." The single most significant change that CAP made was to add the SCANS checklist.

Still, Sheets and his colleagues used the alignment process to analyze CAP and more clearly organize it as a step-by-step process. As the standards are supposed to do, the refinements also made the course more challenging. For example, the daily journal is now organized into four questions, each with an accompanying rating scale. Sheets also developed rubrics to clarify expectations. In sum, Sheets stated, "CAP did not change much in terms of the practical operations of the class. Yet the

tighter organization of the course makes everyone more accountable."

The Long View

Service learning practitioners are among the most enthusiastic supporters of Minnesota's new graduation standards because the new standards require what they have always considered to be good teaching. Yet concerns exist. As with any large-scale, systemic change, the implementation of the new standards requires extra time during start-up. Further, some teachers fear that too much assessment might sap the very power of service learning by channeling students' attention away from the community and back toward their own gain. Most significant, many teachers insist that the application of the standards must allow the unplanned learning that is often the most profound outcome of service learning. Kirk Schneidawind says,

Different kids are going to gain different things from this experience. Some might grow up to be world class gardeners. Others will go away from here saying, "gardening is not for me." The big thing for me as a history teacher is that they've been exposed to two different, historically significant approaches to agriculture. The beauty of service learning is that it is flexible.

Still, most Minnesota service learning practitioners take heart in the new stan-

dards because they expand opportunities for learning and emphasize accountability for what is most important. Jim Grimmer, a psychology teacher at Richfield High School, has his students tutor so that they can apply what they have gleaned about learning theory. He says,

The new standards have to do with application of basic learnings. Students take things that at one time they simply memorized, and instead take them into real-life settings. The graduation standards offer the opportunity for every student and teacher to bring learning to a higher level. Application, synthesis, analysis, and integration of information are what real learning is all about.

Every teacher involved in the state effort to strengthen the assessment of service learning is aware that this is a long-term process. Marcia Applen, service learning team leader in St. Peter, laughed when she heard that her school had Minnesota's most advanced program of assessment of service learning. She replied, "We're a year or two into this. If we are in the lead, that just shows how far we all have to go." ■

References

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- Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning. (1998). Chapter 3501: Department of Children, Families & Learning graduation standards. [On-line]. Available: <http://children.state.mn.us/grad/rule3501>

Authors' note: The full text of the Minnesota Graduation Standards and rules is available at the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning Web site (<http://children.state.mn.us/grad/gradhom.htm>).

Rich Cairn and **Susan Cairn** manage the Assessing Learning through Service Project for the Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning. They also direct the Watershed Resources Youth Stewardship Project. They may be reached at 3715 45th Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55406 (e-mail: cairn@gold.tc.umn.edu).