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# Service-Learning in the Community — Are We Ready for the Journey?

by William Finger

*It's late Sunday afternoon in downtown Raleigh, NC, in a low concrete building next to the railroad tracks. We are working in a small room where the 40 residents will eat supper in about an hour, when a church group serves the only full meal of the day for many of the residents. We have folded the tables and pushed them against the wall. Most of the residents are watching television in the only other common room in the building or lying on their bunks in the men's or women's dorm, each a single large room. A few are in the long, dark hall where smoking is allowed or in the tiny laundry room. There is no place else to go, except the crowded staff office and entry area, where every person gets frisked with a magnetic detector. Some haven't arrived yet. The residents are not allowed to leave after checking in for the night.*

*"I have my health and strength today," says David, a tall Raleigh native, who came to the homeless shelter via the military and a stay in Atlanta. "I thank the Lord for that." We continue going around the circle, each of us saying something that we are grateful for about this day. Jenny, a high school junior, explains that she learned this afternoon that she was accepted into a prestigious school club. "I feel proud," she says.*

*We go around the circle again, each of us seven boiling our stories down to one or two words, and then around once more adding a gesture or shape to the phrase. David combines "health and strength" with holding both hands high in the shape of a giant "V." Jenny stands tall and erect, her arms crossed in front with confidence and says, "proud."*

In December 1996, I started planning a community arts project at a downtown Raleigh, NC homeless shelter. Working with Lisa Rhoades of the NSEE staff, I envisioned it having two parts: a pilot, eight-week workshop in the spring and a year-long project in the 1997-98 school year. We submitted a proposal for the year-long project, which would involve paid consultant days. The pilot project would be on a volunteer basis. We saw this as a service-learning project involving the shelter residents and students from local high schools and possibly one college. The primary reflection vehicle would be the creation of the community art project itself, along with group discussions and journals.

I approached NSEE with the project idea after co-editing *Critical Issues in K-12 Service-Learning*, a year-long NSEE project that contained more than 40 essays from people working in the field throughout the country. In shaping the book, we were not able to find many experiences of projects based at community agencies. In almost all cases, service-learning projects begin from a school, which then seeks a community site for its students. This often leads to a patronizing approach in which students go out to help needy people. In the conclusion to the

book, Robert Sigmon challenged the service-learning community to address this imbalance, to focus on the capacity of community groups to be educators, as well as a place to provide service. Even sophisticated community programs with educational offerings, such as museums, rarely include a structured reflection component, allowing a person to understand personal changes triggered by the experience.

While working on the NSEE book, I realized how fundamental experiential education, especially service-learning, had been in my adult life. In my 20s, as a Peace Corps volunteer working with small poultry farmers in India and as a Whitney Foundation fellow working with textile workers in North Carolina, I learned more than I gave. Again, raising a family, volunteering with scouts and at my kids' schools, and participating in other activities resulted in as much learning for me as I provided assistance and service. Also, in my career as a writer and editor, much of my training came on the job — true experiential learning. In all of these experiences, however, I had to rely primarily on my own resources for reflection. While all were community-based experiences, none of them provided a regular structured way to reflect about personal growth, and how my growth

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related to those with whom I was working. These personal experiences, combined with Sigmon's challenge about engaging the community, were in the forefront of my mind as I planned this community arts project.

We wanted the participants in this project to have equal standing. Using movement and storytelling as the primary vehicles for interaction has the potential for an inherently democratic approach. I hoped to guide the project so that all of us — leader, homeless residents, students, and supporters from the institutions — could be both servers and learners. There obviously would be a power imbalance in economic situation, social supports, social status, and levels of confidence in speaking and sharing. We all would, however, have the potential for being equal in terms of sharing our stories and collectively building those into a community art project.

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*Each of the seven of us has a gesture and phrase now, and we begin to put them into a simple set of movements that we can repeat. The goal is to build on these expressions gradually — learning each other's movements and then making simple duets, trios, and quartets. A collective ownership develops with such a group creation, as we manipulate the phrases through space using varying speeds and emotional intentions. George, Jenny, and I hold our arms high in the gesture David offered, pivoting in half turns three times across the width of the room. "Health and strength," we say in unison as we turn, then pause and with punctuation, fold our arms and add, "proud." David and the others aren't confident enough to do this yet, but they are absorbed by the process.*

*We are beginning to create a dance — a middle-aged volunteer from a middle-class home, a 16-year old high school leader, and five people no longer living on the street, having qualified for a bed in this transition shelter. We include two recovering addicts, one quiet man out of prison less than a month, two very religious Christians who sprinkle their sentences with "thank the Lord," and a religious humanist. But these differences are the last thing on our minds.*

\* \* \*

This project had three types of challenges that are common to all service-learning efforts: logistical issues, validity issues of community-based experiential education, and personal motivations. They all involve big subjects: community, education, volunteerism, and in this case, dance/movement.

To mix high school students with residents of a homeless shelter — in a project design that requires consistent attendance, trust building, and eventually a small performance — is very ambitious. This combination can work, I'm convinced, but only if a solid base is already established in either the shelter or the school, and if staff people are invested enough in the project design to make some requirements (or inducements) to have people participate.

I saw the pilot project as a jumping off point. I didn't have all of these pieces in place, nor did any staff person at the shelter or at the two high schools I contacted have time to devote to it. I visited three shelters that have various rules and set-ups and discussed the larger project with a local college. The idea was to

use the spring classes as a chance to learn and adjust the design. In that sense, the pilot project worked, helping me develop relationships at the Ark Shelter, part of the Raleigh Urban Ministries program, and learn what does and does not work well there.

Only one high school in Raleigh has a community service requirement, but it has no reflection component and only a part-time administrator. I worked through that administrator and contacts at another downtown high school, known for its innovative programs. But finding students who would add this project onto their existing school and extracurricular load was difficult, especially coming to a homeless shelter for eight weeks, late on a Sunday afternoon. These logistical obstacles with students would be hard to overcome.

Convincing a group from the shelter to participate on a regular basis would also be difficult. Before the project, I ate dinner with the residents several times and gradually got to know a few of them. The weekend staff person and volunteer coordinator steered me to those who might be most interested in the project, and they supported my efforts. But there was no inducement for the residents to participate — no point or reward system. For most, it was easier to watch TV.

Two high school students expressed interest; one came several times. The number of Ark residents participating fluctuated from three to ten during the eight weeks, depending on how they felt that day, who else was participating, what we did in the class, and whether they were still living there at all. The dining room had to be transformed into a dance space and returned to an eating space. The main problem though was that people could come and go, into the dorms or the TV room, despite my encouragement to make it a "class" where people didn't wander in and out. Other shelters would have various logistical strengths or weaknesses for this kind of project, compared to the Ark. At some, people stay longer or shorter, or have required chores/attendance.

Finding validity in this project would also be a challenge. I had a theoretical notion about the connection between youth about to leave home and adults without a home. Bringing these two groups together should provide a means for both groups to explore realistic notions of home. What does "home" mean? Is it the physical structure? The belongings inside? The people you share it with? The values on which it operates? In exploring such questions together, students and homeless shelter residents would find common ground and discover each other as individuals. Images of "home" haunt all of us through life. An effort to reflect on these images could only be valuable.

I anticipated that the pilot project would help test the validity of the core premise of the project — that images of "home" would be valuable to those about to leave home, as well as those without a home. During the pilot, I understood better how this project might fit into the ongoing curriculum at the school, trying to make it part of regular course requirements for example, as an inducement for participation. To make connections about home with literature or sociology or psychology, students would need more formal reflection in the classroom than we would have time for at the shelter. Among the shelter residents, would this artistic reflection about home complement the hard work many of them were doing with their counselor, planning their next step back into the community? Are not the deeper impulses driving

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our notions about home at the heart of how we make decisions about practical matters? Answering these questions would take longer than eight weeks.

I intended for the eight sessions of the pilot project to follow a similar structure, with simple stretches suggested by the participants, then expressions of ideas through movement and stories, finally grouping these into a simple dance. The dance would evolve, eventually to be presented to an Urban Ministries group or at some other community setting at the end of the project. What happened instead was a series of self-contained sessions, due to turnover and different interests among those who came. The classes provided a chance for shelter residents to express themselves through movement, talking, drawing, and playing percussion instruments, but they didn't build into a structured closing presentation.

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*We move into another technique for gathering material — doing simple drawings and then making shapes or moving through space matching the lines and objects in the drawings. I ask them to draw something about their home that they remember liking. Daisy draws a big box with four tiny squares marked "room" down each side and "Danger Zone" at the top. "That's the crack house where I used to live," she says. She is in the picture, a tiny, half-inch high stick figure at a table between the rooms. David's picture is in the kitchen, with a vase and flowers on the table. At the top he wrote, "Grandmother was in the kitchen baking buttermilk biscuits." Crystal has trouble putting anything on the paper. Daisy sits at the table against the wall encouraging Crystal.*

*George is in the middle of the floor, looking at the long line down his drawing that leads to a closed door. I suggest he move down the room, like that long line. He tries it. Then we add the pivot, turning motion with "health and strength" to his long line. We've taken the simple dance across one direction and down the other.*

*"Look, I drew that!" Crystal yells out, giggling and holding up her drawing. She's thrilled with a stick table and chair. It's a start.*

\* \* \*

Like others working in service-learning projects, my motivations were complex, involving community dance, personal service, and issues of homelessness. I had been training in a form of modern dance that works with people of all ages with no dance training. Developed by Liz Lerman working with elders, and expanded through the Dance Exchange in Washington, DC over the last 25 years, the technique draws on the beauty of all movement done with intention. The movement serves as a way for people to tell stories, express their hopes and fears, and create art. I had led several small projects using these techniques and found it worked well as a means of healing personal wounds, creating community among the participants, and engaging an audience in the material. The poet, May Sarton, says, "Whatever the wound that has to heal, the moment of creation assures

that all is well ... that the inner chaos can be probed and distilled into order and beauty." My experiences using this movement approach have shown her to be right.

The service element was also compelling. Homelessness has been a psychological issue for me over the years. What is my home and what function does it serve in my life? I've been drawn to the homeless. But the times I have volunteered at a shelter have not been satisfying. The volunteers stood around, talking at best with each other, with little interaction with the residents. I knew that people in that life situation had lessons to teach me; I needed to learn from them to understand what I had. Also, on a broader scale, service of any sort has been a vehicle for me in dealing with a propensity for depression, for self absorption, for not paying attention to the many blessings of each day, despite what my particular situation may be at the time.

In short, like many teachers or administrators or persons at community agencies needing a lift from everyday responsibilities, I wanted to explore a service-learning project that could be exciting, fun, healing, challenging, and engaging, and possibly pay some of the bills. I wanted to deepen my skills and experiences with developing a community art project through movement. This project held all of these possibilities.

For eight Sunday classes and another dozen or so visits to the shelter, I felt more alive when I left the Ark than when I arrived. I felt more engaged with the world, with people. I felt I was offering a gift that others were willing to accept and use together. I felt alert to the details of life, in all their beauty as well as their sadness. The low point in the project came when one of the most enthusiastic dancers, a man full of vitality and personality, was asked to leave the shelter for drinking (an absolute rule at the Ark). The high point was an exchange of gifts with one man who participated in the most classes.

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*It is 6:15 now, time to begin to set the tables back up. We are at a stopping point anyway. It's been a great class, the third Sunday of the eight weeks. I'm thinking, maybe we can pull this off. As we begin to reassemble the dining hall, I put back on the tape used for the warm-up exercise, Bobby McFerrin singing "Don't Worry, Be Happy." At the beginning of the class to warm-up, each person did a stretching motion in their own style and shape. Then we repeated them, combined in a specific order, a steady rhythm and a counted sequence. We put it with Bobby McFerrin and had a simple warm-up dance.*

*Pulling the chairs around the long metal tables down the middle of the room, Daisy reaches her arm out across the table and snaps her fingers — one of the warm-up motions. The rest of us pick up the beat. "Remember the turn," I say, moving two steps to the right and turning in a small circle. We're all moving to the right now, singing, "don't worry, be happy," putting chairs back, snapping our fingers in unison, and circling, mostly together. The church group is coming in now to get the food ready. They're not sure what to make of us but they begin smiling too.*

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In June, after the eight-week pilot ended, we learned that NSEE did not get the grant for next year. We have not submitted

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another proposal at this point, nor am I planning to lead a similar project on a volunteer basis. The lack of funding is part of it, but the logistics at the Ark, as currently set up, were also very difficult to overcome. The approach would have to be recast to work there.

The pilot project provided the background I needed. However, to develop a full-fledged, ongoing project would take a longer-term commitment than I am ready to make as a volunteer working alone. Also, it would take time and a lot of energy by staff members at schools and at the shelter. More structure and people are needed to make it work.

If we had gotten the funding, the next step would have been to develop a project design collaboratively, with input from Ark staff, shelter residents, students, and faculty. This is a time-consuming process. The staff at the Ark and the sympathetic teachers at the high schools are vastly overworked. I did a very simple questionnaire at dinner one night after my last session among those who had participated throughout the spring. I asked them what types of artistic programs they would like. The gist of the answers was that they wanted any kind of art project — dance, drumming and percussion, drawing, singing, all of the above. We had touches of all of these during the eight weeks.

The democratic impulses of a community art project continue to attract me. Movement is the language that speaks most directly to me, but for others it could be visual art or singing or playing simple rhythm instruments. These expressions offer universal languages that do not depend on education or status. Sharing these expressions and combining two persons' phrases into one takes our individual problems into a broader emotional context.

In even this short, small project, I saw moments of true reciprocity, moments of growth among shelter members as they served others. I saw women in the shelter — those who are generally considered the ones "to be served" — make Jenny feel welcome and comfortable in this strange place. Ann, one of the shelter "graduates," came to several of the sessions. Even though the movement exercises were a new experience, she made an effort to talk with Jenny and integrate her into the group. "I didn't know what I was doing, but the moving felt great," Ann said. Simply by being "out there" in the middle of our "dance" floor, Ann was demonstrating to other shelter women that they could try it too.

Other shelter residents showed that true reciprocity between those serving and being served can also occur within the same social group. Crystal would not have drawn her picture without Daisy's support. When Just, a regular participant in the last several sessions, talked to George about his drawing, George's eyes lit up. "That long line to the closed door is like the road ahead," said Just. "You're ready to open that door now and move on." George was laughing, with animation. Down the hall, between the laundry room and the staff office, he was explaining to several others how he was making a dance with his picture.

In these moments, distinguishing between the server and the person being served blurred. The process of giving and receiving simply folded into a heart-felt interaction between two hu-

man beings. From these brief moments, I know that true reciprocity in service-learning is more than a theory. I saw it and felt it.

The performance would have offered the service-learning benefits to another audience, as well as given the project more closure. But it was not to be this time. Even so, the reflection process helped with both. Writing in my journal helped me, and I sent e-mails to Lisa at NSEE, sharing the details of each session. I wrote a wrap-up memo to those who had supported the project, and this writing here has helped. Despite all of this, a feeling of sadness remains. I wish I could have pulled it off. Found a group to take this on. Had the patience to stick with it. Been a better leader. The men and women at the Ark — particularly those who always avoided me — seeped into my skin. And I am better for it. The "homeless" became individuals with names and faces, histories and personalities. Each was dealing with varying combinations of bad luck, circumstances of birth, poor choices, lack of opportunities, and discrimination.

\* \* \*

*It is three months after the pilot project ended, Labor Day weekend. I am on a short bus ride, returning from an environmental festival held in the woods at the site of a proposed thoroughfare. The driver takes us back to the state fairgrounds where we parked our cars. I'm one of the last ones off, my teenage daughter and her friend scooted ahead. When I got off the bus, the driver is standing beside the door watching me with a huge grin on his face. I look back and realize I know him from somewhere. I start to move on, but he keeps looking at me, smiling.*

*"We know each other, don't we," I say. He nods. "But I can't remember from where."*

*"From the Ark," he says, beaming. I remember this tall man, now so handsome in his uniform, hat in hand.*

*"Oh, yeah, you're Robert. You drew the picture of your grandmother's kitchen." We're both laughing now. We give each other a big hug. I ask about Daisy. They have moved out of the Ark and gotten their own apartment. He's working for the bus company, a step up from bundling newspapers at the publishing company at night. I wish him well and head for the car.*

*The same warm feeling I had when I left the Ark fills me. I am more alive. I know the person driving this bus as a human being with a history. And, he knows me. We have a small shared history. I look back at him, and we wave. We have our health and strength. And, we are both proud.*

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Service-learning projects truly based in community settings are challenging. Most of the funding for service-learning comes through school-based projects. Community agencies are busy with other priorities. Logistics can also be overwhelming. Despite such barriers, small ripples of change circle out. Trickles from a mountain stream feed into gushing rivers.

This project at the Ark Shelter in Raleigh, NC does not have to end. It can continue in two concrete ways. First, all of those steeped in the service-learning field can step back and think seriously about working with a community-based project using the arts. Community arts is a growing field, but most of these artists work a "day job." They have skills that can offer people in home-

less shelters or prisons or elderly housing projects a chance to express their emotions, their past, their life stories. But community artists need help and support from people with training in service-learning. We know how to write grants, conceptualize projects, form community partnerships, build reflection into the process from the beginning. Maybe this trickle of a stream from the Ark can flow into our own towns.

A second appeal goes to the homeless shelters specifically. If you're looking for a place to begin, try this population. People who are homeless are individuals who need a chance to reflect with each other about expectations, experiences, caring for one another — about home and the bonds that nurture a home.

Experiential learning can and should take place in community settings whether schools are involved or not. To move beyond schools to homeless shelters and other community settings is the next great frontier for structured service-learning programs. It takes a leap of faith. I know. But I remember the day I knocked on the door at the Ark and asked to speak to the director. She heard my idea and said, "Sure, let's try it."

So, I ask you to take that first step. Knock on the door at the shelter. Call the volunteer coordinator at the prison. Visit the high rise packed with older people with time on their hands. Give service-learning a chance. You'll be embarking on a journey that puts people, often found on the margins, at the center.

*Bill Finger has been a writer and editor for over 25 years and is currently senior editor/writer at Family Health International, a research organization focusing on reproductive health. For the last six years, he has worked with community dance projects with non-dance audiences on projects that have involved male initiation, race, and home. For NSEE, he has co-edited Critical Issues in K-12 Service-Learning: Case Studies and Reflections.*

## Community Partners Conference Fund

PLEASE CONSIDER contributing to the  
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The goal of this fund is to make NSEE's conference more accessible to the community partners with whom many of us work by paying their conference registration fee. Contributions of any size are welcome. Add the amount you wish to donate to your conference registration in the space provided or mail them at any time directly to NSEE, attention Mary McLeod.

If you would like more information about the NSEE Community Partners Conference Fund, contact Holly Ivel, Program Associate at NSEE.

Thank you for your support.

## Research Notes

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*For more information contact Kathleen Zawacki at <zawackik@pilot.msu.edu>.*

*Outcomes of Service Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Curricular-based and Non-curricular-based Alternative Spring Breaks. Kelley A. McElhaney, University of Michigan, 1997*

This doctoral dissertation explores the affective/cognitive and psychological/behavioral student outcomes of a service-learning experience. The study sought to expand our understanding of the types of complex outcomes that students derive from community service. The experience of two groups of undergraduates who participated in a community service-learning immersion project, Alternative Spring Break (ASB), over the university's spring break, formed the basis of this research. A curricular-based group enrolled in a semester-long class in which they studied the theories and issues with which they worked in the community. The non-curricular group performed service only during the week of spring break; there was no curricular component. The data were derived from case study methodology using formal structured interviews, informal interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and document analysis. In analyzing the data collected, Guba and Lincoln's 1985 method of processing naturalistic data was used to develop domains of types of student outcomes from the service-learning experience. These outcomes were then overlaid on Astin's (1990) student outcomes matrix, first for both groups as a whole, and then separately, comparing the two groups.

*(Note: The final findings of this study were not available at the time of printing). For more information contact <kmack@umich.edu>.*

## Service Programs-General

*History and Debate: Political Advocacy in National Service. Thomas P. Shields, Tufts University, 1996*

This masters thesis considers a historical and current tension faced by national service programs: "what role, if any, should political advocacy play in national service programs?" After considering the history of the debate surrounding political advocacy within national service in the 20th century, the arguments of including political advocacy within national service are presented in three areas: (1) political sustainability, (2) program impacts, and (3) political theory. The thesis recommends enhancing the Corporation for National Service programs by replacing the political advocacy prohibition with the following: (1) decreased partisanship, (2) increased local control over programs, (3) enforced high standards for the multiple national service goals, (4) released private funds donated from federal restrictions, and (5) strengthened service-learning models to promote citizenship development. *For more information contact Tom Shields at tpshield@staffuiuc.edu*

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