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Enhancing Programming for Impact through Service-Learning

National Senior Service Corps

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Enhancing Programming for Impact through Service-Learning

"And when is there time to remember, to sift, to weigh, to estimate, to total?"
Tillie Olsen in *Tell Me a Riddle*



"I am amazed..."

*An introduction to service-learning,
using journalling, in a Senior Corps program*

Roxanne Smith Parks, Director of the South East Texas Foster Grandparent Program and Co-Director of the Experience Corps, a Senior Corps Demonstration Project, says that when she was first asked about introducing journalling into the daily activities of her program's volunteers, she was "the biggest skeptic... I didn't think it would work." She was worried about the time it would take, how her volunteers would respond, how the journals would work for people of diverse educational backgrounds and, mostly, about the value of doing it.

But after only four weeks of the Experience Corp's program's volunteers writing regularly, she says, "I am amazed. Their journals are a wonderful way of listening to our volunteers. We are getting to know our volunteers more quickly. From their writings, we can also see what training we still need to do. We see where we need to give more reinforcement... and they give us great ideas for how we can improve what we do, at all levels. I am converted."

Roxanne also describes how the writing has impacts not only for her program but also for the volunteers themselves. Even though she asks only 15 minutes a day of writing from her volunteers, some continue their writing at home in the evenings. The volunteers know that their words will affect their programs, and so it

gives them a stronger sense of ownership in what they do. And through the reflective process of writing, they deepen and enrich their understanding of their volunteer service—and report how they do their service more thoughtfully and thoroughly.

The experiences of Roxanne and her volunteers echo what Suzanne Goldsmith, author of *A City Year: On the Streets and in the Neighborhoods with Twelve Young Community Service Volunteers*, has said about service and writing for younger people:

Service participants can use journals to explore the value of their contribution through service, to learn from their own mistakes and those of others, to reinforce positive feelings such as pride and caring, and to explore and find productive channels for negative feelings such as frustration. They can give themselves a record of the experience to read again and again—often resulting in fresh ideas and insight.

As Roxanne Smith Parks has described, older volunteers—and the programs where they volunteer—can reap the same benefits from regular reflection.

The purpose of this packet is to give you ideas for how you might strengthen something you probably already do in your programs: this packet holds suggestions for how you can shape reflective time so that it has direct impacts on the service you do.



What is Service-Learning?

Service-learning grows out of ideas about experiential education. Experiential education believes that:

- *People learn best when their learning grows out of and connects to their experiences.*
- *People learn best when they are actively involved with whatever they are learning (through doing, talking, reading, interacting with others, exploring, writing, making things).*
- *People learn best when they have time to reflect, regularly, on their experiences.*

This is learning that doesn't require classrooms, but rather experiences rich with potential—as service is.

But service-learning is not just experiential education where the experience happens to be service instead of something else. One of the basic premises of service-learning is that service is—and should be—of benefit both to the one served and to the one serving, and that both service and learning must be emphasized if thoughtful learning is to happen.



“Service-learning makes for happier volunteers and richer service.” — Linda Harker, RSVP of Montgomery County



What can result from Service-Learning, in general

Ellen Porter Honnet and Susan J. Poulsen of the Johnson Foundation write in their *Wingspread Special Report: Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning*:

The combination of service and learning is powerful. It creates potential benefits beyond what either service or learning can offer separately. The frequent results of service and learning are that participants:

- *Develop a habit of critical reflection on their experiences, enabling them to learn more throughout life.*
- *Are more curious & motivated to learn.*
- *Are able to perform better service.*
- *Strengthen their ethic of social and civic response.*
- *Feel more committed to addressing the underlying problems behind social issues.*
- *Understand problems in a more complex way and can imagine alternative solutions.*
- *Demonstrate more sensitivity to how decisions are made and institutional decisions affect people's lives.*
- *Learn how to work more collaboratively with other people on real problems.*

Why do service-learning?

We all know that you can't help but learn from doing service, and that you can't help but be changed by being involved with others in your community... especially when, as is often the case with Senior Corps programs, people who might not normally have time with each other are given the chance to work closely together. By making service-learning part of your program, you

will be insuring that your volunteers don't just *maybe* learn from what they do, but that they *will* learn, and in a thoughtful and reflective manner. By incorporating service-learning, you help your volunteers apply what they learn back to what they do, increasing the strengths and impacts of your program.



What can result from Service-Learning, in the Senior Corps

Service-learning can help programs make a difference in the lives of their volunteers. Service-learning can help seniors stay mentally and physically active, by asking them to use skills they might not otherwise. Service-learning challenges seniors to build on and apply the wisdom and knowledge they have acquired in their lives—thereby validating that wisdom and knowledge.

Once people know that a program asks this of them—and values them for it—they will be more likely to volunteer, and to volunteer with more enthusiasm and commitment. In addition, service-learning provides opportunities for volunteers to hear how others are thinking about and responding to the service—and so it can provide and deepen support between all involved, further enhancing their commitment.

But service-learning can also help programs make more of a difference in their communities. Volunteers who are regularly reflecting on their service, and who are regularly asking themselves “What difference did we make?” are more likely to care about the overall successes of a program. They are more likely to perceive community need, and more likely to come up with new possibilities for action and with creative solutions to stumbling blocks. They are more likely to increase the impacts of a program.



How to begin doing service-learning... & how much time it takes

The words above may make it sound as though service-learning takes a tremendous amount of time and effort, time and effort that are already spread thin in any program. But chances are that most programs already have the seeds—if not the seedlings—for robust service-learning.

One of the essentials for service-learning to happen is that volunteers have regular time for reflecting on their volunteer service. This reflection can take the form of writing, videotaping, audiotaping, drawing, talking with another... but it is time set aside for reflection, for volunteers (and sometimes clients, agencies, staff, and others involved with the program) to think through and about their service.

Reflection can be made part of group activities, when (for example) a number of people share their understanding and the group thinks through an issue together. Reflection can be done individually, through (for example) writing in a journal in response to an article in a program’s newsletter.

Most programs already make regular time for checking in with their volunteers, for getting feedback. Programs have recognition luncheons for their volunteers, or times for volunteers to get together to share their experiences. Each of these times could be an opening for more conscious reflection.

**The following pages in this packet describe various strategies
for getting started with service-learning.**



Reflection is most fruitful when it is a habit.

It can be like going into the most comfortable, most safe room you can imagine.

Reflection is a necessary part of understanding something thoroughly.

*Reflection helps us understand what we don't know,
what we're uncomfortable with, what stays with us.*



What Service-Learning can look like in Senior Corps projects

The following examples, while showing what can happen in specific kinds of service activities, are easily modifiable for any kind of activity...



Tutoring Elementary School Children

The volunteers in a Foster Grandparent program serve for 20 hours each week, in different schools, helping elementary school students with their reading and writing. Each day, the volunteers write for 15 minutes on their own, in response to a series of questions* they developed with the Project Director. They write as much or as little as they want: some people take their writing home to finish; others jot down short notes. At the end of each month, the Project Director meets with the volunteers, who share their observations and writing.

The results

The Project Director reports that the volunteers are more involved with their work: they write about problems they encounter, and use the writing to work out possible solutions (or how they might go about finding solutions). The volunteers describe successes—and failures (and try to figure out how to avoid failures in the future).

The volunteers sometimes write alongside the children they are tutoring, and talk about what they are doing with the children, to show the children one value of writing. The Project Director uses excerpts from the writings to “advertise” how her program is making a difference in the lives of the children, as well as in the lives of the volunteers.

How this is implemented

When the Project Director first considered using journals, she set up a meeting with her volunteers. She described what she hoped to achieve with the writing. The volunteers were receptive, and, with the Project Director, they figured out how they would work the writing regularly into their days.

The volunteers decided that it would help them if they had a set of questions from which to start, so together they decided which questions would help them think about their day-to-day service and its daily and longer-term impacts.

They made the questions into a one-page outline; every day, they begin their writing by working with (and writing on) the outline, but they know they can write more (or less) if they choose.

The Project Director (who meets with the volunteers once a month) made it clear that she, and others administering the program, would be reading the volunteers’ writing, so that they could have a better sense of what the volunteers were doing day-to-day.

The volunteers are pleased about that, since it gives them a way to make known how they—and those they serve—are doing, how the program can better support them, and what differences they are making.

* The questions are straightforward, and meant to spark thinking. Some of the questions are: *What did you do today? Do you think this made an impact on the children? (Why or why not?) What was the impact on you? What frustrations did you have today? What successes did you have today? What thoughts do you have about things you can do in the future to help the children succeed?*



A Neighborhood Watch

The volunteers in an RSVP program are reinvigorating a Neighborhood Watch program in several neighborhoods of a city. The Project Director has set aside an hour a week for them to meet, share coffee, and talk about how their service is going. During one of these meetings, a volunteer notes that a friend of hers, in another neighborhood, is interested in establishing a Neighborhood Watch there, too, because of rising crime. The Project Director takes note of the need, and another volunteer wonders how they can spread to others what they have learned about organizing a Neighborhood Watch.

The group decides to make a video about what they are doing, so that they can share their experiences. During several of their weekly meetings, they make an outline of what they want the video to contain, and then over two months they shoot footage, using the cameras of two of the volunteers. They ask for—and get—help from a video class at a local community college in editing their work and adding titles.

The results

The group produces a video that answers a community need—and that allows them to reflect on how they are doing. The volunteers who work on the video report that they like the variety of the work, but also that they have learned from the new perspective of the video: through the process of outlining the video, they have to be clear about their successes as well as about problems they have encountered; the process encourages them to make some changes in the way they work (for example, to make use of more community resources).

At the end of the video project, the volunteers organize a celebration for the community and themselves, and they invite people from other communities. They show the video, and make copies

available to others; there is a nice article in the local paper about their work and the video. Four other neighborhoods request copies of the video, and ask the Project Director how they can get Senior Corps volunteers involved. Several individuals from those communities ask how they can become volunteers.

How this is implemented

The Project Director simply made sure that volunteers had a regular time to meet and talk—the volunteers did most of the rest. The Project Director helped by suggesting community resources the volunteers could draw on and by making some money available for the purchase of video tape.

What volunteers from RSVP of Montgomery County, Inc. say about service-learning:

“...it has given me an opportunity to remain active, to feel needed, and be useful by sharing the knowledge and abilities I gathered during my active working life and to give back something to my community. In this, my efforts have been amply rewarded because I have felt that these efforts have been useful and appreciated.”
—Eugene C. Pressler, Jr.

“...my own gratification has been boundless. As a retired senior citizen, I have been privileged to continue to function in my areas of professional interest and expertise to an extent that has helped me remain vitally active and healthy, both physically and mentally. I have watched RSVP vastly expand its contributions to education and community service in ways that contribute some responses to crying needs of our nation. I am proud to be a part of this contribution.” —Adele Gerber



Providing Respite Care for Alzheimer's Care Givers

Twelve Senior Companions visit a total of 30 families per week, for approximately eight hours a visit. During the visits, the families can do errands and get work done (and have a little time to themselves) that they otherwise couldn't do because they care for a parent with Alzheimer's.

Once a month, the 12 volunteers meet for lunch and discussion. For each month, one volunteer works with the Project Director to find a speaker, and a reading that will serve as an introduction to the speaker. For example, one month the Head Nurse from the local gerontology clinic comes to talk about the stages of Alzheimer's; prior to his visit, the volunteers read a 5-page article on how Alzheimer's develops. After lunch and the Nurse's talk, the volunteers ask questions, and then write for 10 minutes, recording what they have learned and how they think they can use what they discussed. They share with each other what they have written.

The results

The 12 companions report that, because of the information they receive, they feel better able to help the families they serve. They understand better what to expect from their clients and the clients' families.

The volunteers also say that they appreciate being expected to learn more about what they do, and that their efforts to find speakers and readings have helped them make better community connections for supporting their service. They say that, because of the monthly meetings, they see their service in the broader context of how health care and aging are regarded in this country—which gives them a better understanding of how their own lives are affected and of what they can do for themselves and their own families.

How this is implemented

From the first, the Project Director let the volunteers know about the monthly meetings and the volunteers' responsibilities for finding a speaker and a related reading. In one of her first meetings with the volunteers, she handed out lists of suggested speakers, and suggestions for how to contact them and how to find readings; the volunteers also brainstormed suggestions.

At the end of each meeting, the Director meets with the volunteer who is responsible for the speaker for the following month, to check on the volunteer's success.

The Director arranges the time and place and inexpensive meal for the meeting. The volunteer who arranged for the speaker is responsible for sending a "thank you" note to the speaker.

What volunteers from the Experience Corps in Nederland, Texas, say about journaling:

"I journal every day. It really, really helps me." — Mildred Asbury

"I like journaling. I can go back and see if the child I'm with has made any improvements. I always seem to have a different story to tell." — Yvonne Terry

"I tend to procrastinate, so I don't journal every day. I take notes every hour on the hour, however. Then I journal all at one time from my notes. It gives [the program staff] a chance to know what is going on." — Socorro Burnett

"I think our writing really shows the need for our program!" — Audrey Prater



HELPING FAMILIES AVOID INSTITUTIONALIZING FAMILY MEMBERS

Twenty Senior Companion Program volunteers serve 20 hours per week in this program: they visit low-income families where one family member needs full-time care. That family member would have to be institutionalized—or the primary caretaker would have to stop working—if not for the assistance given by the volunteer. The volunteers keep the family member company, and prepare light meals.

Because these volunteers are on their own a lot, the Project Director has asked them to join into groups of four. Each group of four has a round-robin “letter” going to keep them feeling connected: once a week, one volunteer writes down, in a notebook, what she is thinking about her service, and then passes the notebook on to the next person in her group.

The volunteers write about what they do to keep the time they spend with their clients lively; they write down questions that come up as well as advice they want to pass along. They express their feelings about aging themselves, and about one day having to be dependent on their own families; they write about spending time with people whose lives are so different from their own.

Once a month, the Project Director collects the notebooks, and reads through them with the Volunteer Station Supervisor. Although the Supervisor has regular phone contact with her volunteers, the writing helps her learn more closely how the volunteers are doing, and how she can better support them.

The results

The volunteers—both in the notebooks and in the monthly assessments they do with the Field Coordinator—report that the notebooks help them feel connected with each other, and that they feel extra support for their service. They appreciate the advice they get from each other, and also that they are able to share what they learn.

Several volunteers also report that they read from the notebooks to their clients: the clients like hearing about how other shut-ins are doing, and sometimes pass on words of advice or questions of their own. Several volunteers also report that having the notebooks, in addition to their regular talks with the Station Supervisor, helped them stay with their service at times when it seemed particularly hard and lonely.

How this is implemented

Towards the end of their introductory meeting, the Project Director asked the volunteers to get into groups of four. She gave each group a three-ring binder, with paper, and explained the purposes of the round-robin “letter.” One person from each group volunteered to be the first to write, and each group worked out how it would trade off the notebook.

During the first weeks, in her phone conversations with volunteers, the Station Supervisor would remind the volunteers to write; after that, the volunteers kept the notebooks going themselves.

“Service-learning, in my opinion, provides stimulus to activities and programs that might otherwise not take place...” — Hal Smolinsky, RSVP of Montgomery County



Organizing a river clean-up

Over two months of the summer, RSVP volunteers organize a clean-up day for a local river. Out of donated office space, they call community organizations, local companies, and various news organizations, pulling together other volunteers and equipment, and arranging for publicity for the big day.

At one of their first meetings, one volunteer expresses frustration because he feels that what they learn about organizing the community will be quickly lost once the clean-up is over. Another volunteer suggests that they keep a group notebook: into it they can put all their notes, records of their phone calls, any advice they want to pass on, news clippings, photographs... anything they think would be useful to others. Other volunteers like this idea, and they draw up a quick list of guidelines for how they will proceed. They set aside a file drawer for storing what they collect.

The results

Several days after the clean-up, the volunteers come back to the file drawer (which has overflowed into another drawer and has contributions from visitors as well as from people who volunteered on the clean-up day only) and spend an afternoon going back through everything there. They reminisce about the project, laughing over what worked and what could have gone better.

They take several days to organize the material, putting it into a large portfolio, adding notes to fill in the gaps and to explain what might not be self-evident. They keep in mind the purpose of what they are doing, to help others who might serve on similar projects later.

Some volunteers use the portfolio when they speak to local service groups about the clean-up project and about organizing similar projects. When the portfolio isn't in use, it lives in the Project Director's office, as a fine memory of a project done well, as a resource for "advertising" the RSVP's service, and as a tool for helping other projects.

How this is implemented

This service-learning activity was begun and run completely by the volunteers, with the support and encouragement of the Project Director.

About a service-learning project in Washington State:

The RSVP of Lewis, Mason, and Thurston Counties sponsors the *Synergy Intergenerational Arts Program*, which, under the leadership of Christine Kirk, brings together experienced artists over the age of fifty with youth in various ways: one-on-one, within classrooms, and in small groups. The older artists, known as Synergy Mentors and talented in the visual, theater, or writing arts, are guides to the young people—and sometimes collaborators.

One component is the Synergy Pen-Pals Project, in which the adults corresponded over seven weeks with 4th and 5th graders. Everyone wrote about weekly topics—the same for both adult and student—that were designed to encourage the writers to reflect on their lives and to share those reflections with each other. The adult writers discussed what it was like to grow up in the first half of the century, and what they felt to be their greatest life achievements; the students discussed growing up now.

"Synergy has sparked so many connections for its participants," says Chris Sullivan, Executive Director. "We expected that having experienced artists share their expertise and wisdom with youngsters would encourage the students's natural creativity. The bonus was discovering how the seniors connected with each other not just as fellow teachers and artists, but as peers who were learning something new together."

Synergy Mentor Delores Nelson adds, "It's been rejuvenating working with the children. We are bridging the age gap through the arts, finding that the concerns we mentors had as children are the very same ones our students have. Besides, learning is fun, and I like feeling vital again!"



Helping teenage mothers

In this program, 20 FGP volunteers meet for 20 hours a week, one-to-one, with low-income, teenage mothers, to help them with their parenting skills and GED preparation. Every other week, the volunteer and the mother set aside 20 minutes to audiotape together their observations on how they are doing.

The results

Making the audiotapes helps the Foster Grandparent and the mother stay thoughtful about their efforts—and allows them to record successes and think through stumbling blocks. In their program assessments, they list the regular audiotaping as helping them stay in the program.

During one of the recording sessions, one of the children comes into the room, and laughs as he hears his mother's voice on the tape. The volunteer suggests that the mother record herself reading stories to her son: it would help her with her reading skills, and would encourage her son's literacy skills, too. The mother likes the idea, and soon many of the mothers are recording themselves reading. The FGP volunteers help the mothers share tapes back and forth—and soon some of the mothers are talking to each other about what books

their children like best, and why. Some of the mothers write their own stories, and, at the end of the year, the mothers and volunteers put together an audiotape of their best stories; they each keep a copy, and give copies to the library, during a celebration ceremony reported in the local news.

How this is implemented

Before the volunteers started their service, the Project Director told them about the bi-weekly audiotaping sessions, and arranged for a class in how to use the equipment and how to set the mothers at ease and do informal interviews and discussions.

The Director makes a tape recorder and cassette tapes available. The volunteers have worked out their schedules so that only one person at a time needs the equipment.



Further resources

There are many books, magazines, and organizations dedicated to service-learning. If you wish to learn more, the following should help give you a good start:

- Suzanne Goldsmith, *A City Year: On the Streets and in the Neighborhoods with Twelve Young Community Service Volunteers*. NY: The New Press, 1993.
- Kendall, Jane C. and Associates, 1990, *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service*, (three volumes), National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh NC 27609, (919)787-3263.
- National Service-Learning Clearinghouse. 1-800-808-SERVE. e-mail: serve@maroon.tc.umn.edu
- *NSEE Quarterly*, National Society for Experiential Education, 3509 Haworth Dr., Suite 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229, (919) 787-3263
- *Service-Learning in Elder Care*. FLTC, 150 State Street, Suite 301, Albany, NY, 12207-1698. (518) 449-7873