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Service Learning in Alternative Education Settings

SUSAN MEYERS

When service learning is part of the curriculum, students become involved in something important and learn that they can make a difference in the world. Based on John Dewey's (1938) theory of experiential learning, service learning takes the student out of the classroom and into the community. In a 1995 public address, Secretary of Education Richard Riley remarked that "by involving students in hands-on learning, problem solving, and applications of academic knowledge in real settings, service learning can increase students' academic achievement in challenging subjects and creates a sense of engagement that enhances a student's motivation to complete school."

Introducing service learning can be time consuming and filled with interesting challenges. Teachers find, however, that the process yields positive, meaningful results for students and communities. In this article, I discuss service learning as a pedagogical process for teachers serving students defined as "at-risk" in alternative education settings.

Service Learning Defined

With service learning, the curriculum is presented to students through a process of experiential learning and reflection. That is, the service provided to the community is linked to the curriculum such that student learning outcomes include the acquisition of academic skills and knowledge as well as the ability to analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and solve problems with peers and other members of the community.

The National Service Act of 1993 defines *service learning* as follows:

The term "service learning" refers to a method:

- under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs and that are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community;

- that is integrated into the students' academic curriculum and provides structured time for a student to think, talk, or write about what the student did and saw during the actual service activity;
- that provides students with opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real-life situations in their own communities; and
- that enhances what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community and helps to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

Service learning should not be confused with community service. Community service can be a very valuable experience for students; however, the intent of community service is centered around the service provided. Community service activities become service learning when there is a connection among the service, the curriculum, and thoughtful reflection. Reflection occurs before, during, and after each stage of the service learning activity.

Rationale for Including Service Learning in Alternative Education Settings

Many adolescents in alternative education settings are students who have failed or have been failed by the education system. Their basic academic skills are well below expectations for their chronological age, school records are replete with disciplinary actions and absences, and teachers characterize them as unmotivated and uncooperative learners with low self-esteem and ineffective social skills. Pellegrini and Myers (1992) summarize the challenge for instructors in alternative educational settings; such instructors are frequently met with

... the student whose behavior fits the following descriptions: (a) slinking into class as though the room were filled with hydrogen sulfide gas; (b) books and other course work-related materials either forgotten or treated like the droppings from a large, farm animal; (c) posture in class equivalent to that of a creature with no spine or musculature whatsoever to hold its body in an upright position; (d) whatever visual attention is discernible through a seemingly perpetual scowl, is directed toward absolutely anything other

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than the assigned task; (e) preparation for class about as likely as a reduction in public utility rates; and (f) vocal (not necessarily verbal) utterances persistently irrelevant or antagonistic to class activities. The essential communication to the instructor seems to be. . . I hate it here. Nothing academic is even marginally relevant to my life. My attendance here is coerced. If not, I wouldn't come within a hundred yards of this place. (205)

Research on the effects of service learning for students in alternative educational settings is limited; however, the reported results to date are encouraging. Educational researchers have found that when young people participate in service learning they develop problem-solving skills, social competence, and a sense of purpose (Bernard 1991); decision-making, collaboration, writing, and thinking skills (Allam 1995); and critical job readiness, pre-employment skills (Hamilton 1990). Stephens (1995) describes the Valued Youth Program in San Antonio, which identified potential dropouts in middle schools and trained them to serve as tutors in elementary schools. An evaluation of two years of the program revealed that of the 101 tutors in the experimental (service learning) group only one dropped out of school, whereas 11 of the 93 in a comparison group did so. In addition, the students in the service learning group had significantly higher grades in reading and mathematics, fewer disciplinary referrals, and improved attendance; this group also scored significantly higher on self-concept and quality of school life scales.

This preliminary research suggests that when students are actively involved in the process of selecting and implementing a service learning project, and when they are able to make the connection between the project and something that is significant in their lives, they are likely to become motivated and engaged in the learning process. Under these circumstances, academic and social skill acquisition become valuable by-products of the service learning project. Furthermore, the service provided by the students invites members of the community to begin to view the students not as "problems" but as people who can make valuable contributions to the health and well being of a community.

Steps for Incorporating Service Learning into the Curriculum

At first glance, the process for planning and implementing service learning projects may appear overwhelming. However, teachers have found that when the process is taken one step at a time, with the understanding that the planning itself is an important part of the learning experience for teacher and students, it is well worth the time and energy. Here are the basic steps in the process.

Identify Learning Objectives

The first, extremely important step is to determine specific learning objectives. Usually there are two sets of learning objectives: those related to academic skills and those related to social skills. Just as with any other peda-

gogy, service learning is more appropriate for some subject matter than others. At Olympic Alternative High School in Concord, California, where service is an integral part of the curriculum, students are involved in projects that range from tutoring in elementary schools (basic literacy and math), to maintaining gardens in local parks (biology), to intergenerational projects where students help elderly individuals learn how to communicate with their families on the computer.

Select a Project

Some educators find that having students participate in the selection of the project is an important part of their learning experience. Doing so helps student to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for the project. It also is critical that the service learning projects are generated in response to an identified community need (*community* may be defined as the classroom, the school, or the wider community).

Selecting a project based on an assessment of community needs provides an opportunity for students to learn about the assessment process. The needs assessment may be as simple as a few telephone calls to people in the community or as complex as a formal survey. The result should be a number of options from which the teacher and students choose the specific project. The following questions can be used to select a project that will meet the needs of the students and their community:

- Does the project provide opportunities for students to apply skills and knowledge from their course work?
- Does the project include opportunities for developing critical thinking, analytical, problem-solving, and reflection skills?
- Does the project provide opportunities to develop leadership skills and habits of dependability, responsibility, and cooperation?
- Does the project satisfy a real need that is perceived as relevant and worthwhile by both students and the recipients?
- Does the project have a concrete and visible outcome that can be achieved within a realistic time frame?
- Have all of the individuals (school and community personnel) responsible for the project agreed on the specific purpose, process, system for consistent communication, supervision, and expected outcomes of the project?
- Does the project provide opportunities for strengthening students' sense of worth by enabling them to make meaningful contributions to the well being of their community?
- Does the project require transportation, parent/guardian permission, special insurance, or funding?

Develop a Partnership

Quality service learning projects are planned, implemented, and evaluated in a partnership with the communi-

ty they are designed to serve. The partnership should include representation by all the people who will be affected by the project—the “stakeholders.” A list of stakeholders might include students, parents, teachers, local neighbors, and recipients of the service. Once the stakeholders are identified, it is important to create a plan for working collaboratively. To set the stage for success, this collaborative relationship should be based on

- common goals and objectives that are developed collaboratively, agreed upon by all stakeholders, and documented in writing;
- real benefits for everyone involved in the partnership project (again, in writing); and
- clearly expressed expectations regarding roles and responsibilities for all partners and a process for maintaining good, continuous communication among all partners.

Partners in the project who devote time and energy to the development of common goals, benefits, expectations, and processes for working together will go a long way toward avoiding pitfalls once the project is under way. In fact, a written project description detailing the plan is a good project for the students and functions as a guide throughout the project. This plan might include the following:

- Stated goals and objectives
- Description of services to be offered
- Designated number of students and their schedules for project activities
- Identification of site supervisors and their schedules
- Calendar for any meetings or special events
- Process for problem solving
- Plans for training students to serve
- An evaluation plan
- A project budget
- Plans for celebrating successes along the way

Prepare Students

It is critical that students know what their roles and responsibilities are at the service site. An orientation of the students to the site (e.g., agency, park, public library, school) might include an introduction to significant individuals, dress codes, how to check in and report absences, emergency procedures, and other regulations (e.g., regarding smoking, eating, use of telephones, places that are “off limits” for students). If students will be working with a specific population—such as the elderly, young children, or individuals with disabilities—they should be given information about the population that will prepare them to serve appropriately. Some educators have shown students a videotape of the site and the people they will serve. Others have used simulation activities or role playing to help students understand the individuals they will be serving. Finally, students must know exactly what they are supposed to do; how, when, where, and why they are to do it;

and with whom. They also need to know who will supervise their work.

Experienced teachers in alternative education sites have emphasized the importance of this student-preparation component of service learning. In addition, they have found that spelling out to students the consequences for not meeting the clearly defined roles and responsibilities is an important part of the process.

Prepare Site Supervisors

If the students are to be supervised by an individual on the site, it is critical that that person have a very clear understanding of the purpose of the project. The teacher must communicate to the site supervisor explicit expectations for the students’ roles and responsibilities, the specific activities they will be engaged in, the teacher’s role, and the agreed-upon methods for problem solving and for maintaining consistent communication between the teacher and the supervisor.

Link the Project to the Curriculum through Reflection

Through carefully constructed opportunities for reflection, students learn to think about their experiences, analyze and interpret them, and appreciate their significance. Generally reflection is meant to take place after an activity; however, reflection is appropriate at every stage of a service learning project. As students participate in the development of the project, for example, they predict results and analyze the potential results of their plans. Upon completion of the project, they reflect on the results of their project and its effects on their personal growth and on the community.

Reflection can take many forms: small group discussion, personal journals, video- and audiotapes, photo exhibits, posters, portfolios, letters, articles, sculpture, paintings, music, and research papers. Students often choose multiple avenues for their reflections. In some cases, the medium for reflection is dependent on the curricular link. For example, students involved in a project serving individuals who are homeless may want to develop a series of proposals regarding services for the homeless to send to their congressional representatives, write a paper on their concept of social responsibility as it relates to the homeless, create a photo exhibit illustrating the plight of the homeless, or produce a series of audio interviews with individuals who are homeless.

Evaluate the Project

Project evaluation ranges from informal “satisfaction” surveys or interviews to formal qualitative/quantitative evaluation of project outcomes. The evaluation process depends to some extent on the purpose of the project and its related curricular objectives. Teachers have used project evaluation as an opportunity to infuse math concepts into the service learning project or to teach students some social science research methods. Project evaluation can provide the students with an understanding of the effects of their

work and give them a basis for feeling a sense of pride in their accomplishments and contributions.

Celebrate and Recognize Contributions

All partners in the service learning project need to be recognized. The recipients of the service, the site personnel, and the students involved in service learning can share in the celebration of their accomplishments. In some programs, students receive special awards for their contributions; others hold celebration events where the students are publicly recognized for the work they have done. The form and structure of the celebration or recognition is usually related to the specific service learning project. Regardless of how recognition is carried out, it is important not to slight this component.

Examples of Service Learning Projects

Service learning projects meet a need that is identified by the students within the school, local, national, or international community. It is best to start small with projects that are short in duration and are logistically simple (especially in terms of travel, number of partners involved, and materials). Such projects include the following:

- Cross-age tutoring projects in schools and after-school programs that enhance literacy and math for the service learning students and the students who receive the tutoring
- Pollution clean-up projects related to the science curriculum
- Food drives related to the nutrition or social science curriculum
- Community gardens related to health and science curricula
- Intergenerational projects related to history and social science curricula
- Habitat for Humanity projects related to the social studies or math curriculum

Service learning is fast becoming a national movement. At the 1999 National Conference on Service Learning, participants from schools, universities, national, state and local government, and public and nonprofit agencies agreed that this pedagogy has promise for students in alternative education settings. It is certainly an experiential teaching and learning method worth exploring!

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RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Organizations

The Corporation for National Service, 1100 Vermont Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20525, telephone: (202) 606-5000

The corporation is home to AmeriCorps, which gives Americans the opportunity to serve and receive help paying for college, and to Learn and Serve America, which supports service-learning projects in schools (www.learnandserve.org) (202) 606-5000, ext. 136 or 117).

National Youth Leadership Council Service Learning Clearinghouse and Exchange, 1910 West Country Rd. B, Roseville, MN 55113, telephone: (651) 631-3672, fax: (651) 631-2955, e-mail: nylcinfo@nylc.org

- The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse
University of Minnesota
1954 Buford Ave., Rm. R460
St. Paul, MN 55108
Telephone: 1-800-808-SERV
<http://umn.edu/~serve/>
- The National Exchange Center
Peer-Based Service Learning and Technical Assistance
Telephone: 1-877-LSA-EXCH
www.lsaexchange.org
email: lsaexchange@nylc.org

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, College of Health, Education and Human Development, Clemson University, 209 Martin St., Clemson, SC 29634-0726, telephone: (864) 656-2599 fax: (864) 656-0136

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