Teaching ethics through community service

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Abstract

Community service learning, when combined with a program of ethics education, is an effective means of enhancing students' personal, social and moral development as well as their academic performance.

Hardly a day passes that we don't hear or read about the rising crime and suicide rate among young people. According to the United States Department of Justice Statistics, between 1988 and 1992 aggravated assaults by juveniles increased by 80 percent and murder and rape by 50 percent (1992, p. 2). Many people believe that the rising crime rate is due to the lack of ethics education.

A survey by *Time* in February 1993 reported that 4 percent of the American population thought that "Lack of morals/values" was the "main problem facing the country today." Less than a year later, in January 1994, this number had risen to 12 percent. (Lacayo, 1994, p. 52). Indeed, lack of morals was considered second only to the problem of crime and was regarded as a more serious problem than the economy, lack of employment, politicians, and the budget deficit.

Given these concerns, it's no wonder that the youth of today are considered by some to be "ethical illiterates and moral idiots, unprepared to cope with ordinary life experiences" (Lamm, 1986, p. 35). Young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often feel powerless as well as alienated from society and the traditional school-bound curriculum. Experiential learning, in the form of community service learning, has the potential to counter this destructive trend.

In order to transcend the egoistic morality of early childhood thinking, students need real-life opportunities.

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Rationale

The primary purpose of community service learning is to prepare students to become enlightened citizens who can participate in society with dignity, sensitivity and wisdom. These are also goals of ethics education.

Most of us are influenced by our culture, ethnicity, environment, family and peers far more than we want to admit. However, this does not mean that we cannot change our attitudes and thought processes. Community service exposes us to new and different situations which in turn can help facilitate our personal growth and moral development. Community service learning, by definition, is "an instructional strategy in which students are involved in experiential education in real-life settings and where they apply academic knowledge and previous experience to meet real community needs" (Minnesota Department of Education, 1992).

Research has shown that community service learning has a profound effect on students' social, personal and moral development (Boss, 1994; Adams, 1993; Maher, 1992). Educator and philosopher John Dewey (1939) was one of the primary advocates of experiential learning in first half of this century. He argued that out-of-classroom experience is a necessary condition for moral growth and effective participation in a democratic society. Dewey's conviction has since been confirmed by several studies. It has been found that the most successful moral education programs at all levels are those that promote volunteer work or community-based programs (Boss, 1994; Honig, 1990; Heller, 1989; Nucci, 1985).

Classroom learning without a community-based experiential component, according to educational psychologist Howard Gardner, "seems strictly bound to school settings" (1991, p. 119). When confronted with moral issues outside the classroom students simply revert back to their earlier modes of moral reasoning. In order to transcend the egoistic morality of early

childhood thinking, students need real-life opportunities to "regularly confront, wrestle with, and have to enact their moral principles in a consistent manner" (Ibid., p. 122). Community service learning, when combined with discussion of real-life moral issues and dilemmas, is one of the most effective ways of providing these opportunities for students.

Community service learning has been shown to promote awareness of social issues and to help develop a sense of civic responsibility by encouraging students to assume meaningful roles in the community where they are called upon to respond to the real needs of society as well as their own need to be "part of the solution" (Schine, 1990; Pereira, 1990; Rutter and Newman, 1989). One student who worked at a Veteran's Administration Hospital as part of a college ethics-based community service learning program wrote in the summary of his journal:[1]

> When I first learned that we had to do community service I thought of it as being a complete drag. I felt that I had enough to do let alone work for twenty hours for free and then keep a journal. I realized after the second time I went to the VA that I really wanted to do community service. I kept thinking of the people there who needed someone to talk to. I loved working with these men. I think that I will always do community service now because of this good experience!

The next selection is from a student who volunteered in an adult literacy program:

> Teaching adults how to read has been a great learning and growing experience... I was so impressed by the student's determination to learn and it puts a new sense of faith in me for the people of our world. Also, the program has spelled out to me in bright big letters, that in order for our society to end all of our social problems we need to educate all children and not just push the poor aside.

In addition to developing personal initiative and leadership skills (Maher, 1992), almost all students report that the experience strengthens their self-confidence and their self-esteem (Boss, 1994). Proper self-respect, or what Kant terms the "principle of self-love," is considered by many ethicists to be our primary moral duty since without self-respect we are unable to respect others (Kant, 1788/ 1956, p, 20). Service learning is particularly important as a means of countering the negative self-images often found in urban youths (Harrington, 1992). A student who worked as a tutor in an inner city school wrote:

> I sought to improve the confidence of my tutees by leading them to explore and experience their inner capabilities. In the process, I discovered capabilities within myself that I was not previously sure were there (though I had hoped they were!) It is a reward-

ing experience to participate in the improved achievement of others; for their achievements contribute to your own.

Another inner city minority student wrote in her journal conclusion:

> Before this class I never paid much attention to moral issues. Part of the problem was that I was never asked my opinion on an issue... Because of the volunteer work I feel better about myself. I feel as though I have contributed to society. When people asked me where I was going every Monday at 2:30 they were shocked that I was doing volunteer work. They knew it was for a class but it changed the way they thought about me.

The great majority of students who engage in an ethics-based community service program also report that they feel empowered by the experience (Boss, 1994). A student who worked at a nursing home wrote:

> I would like to say that at first I thought all of this volunteer work would be overwhelming and a couple of times it did get to be too much. But, now that it is all over and I look back on it, I am very proud to have affected so many lives with such little ways.

Another student with a disability wrote that the community service work:

> ... made me do physical things that I just never attempted before out of embarrassment--raking, moving big things...I did jobs I just normally would never try. I guess when I think about it now, the volunteer work was truly rewarding to the people I' helped, and especially to myself...

Community service learning also changes the way students, and teachers, think about other people by bringing them into contact with people they might otherwise never get to know. These experiences help to increase students' moral sensitivity and expand their moral community. The following excerpts are from a student who volunteered at a Veteran Administration Hospital, and a student who worked in a nursing home:

> When I first went to the VA hospital, I was very nervous. I had in my mind a stereotype of what the psychiatric unit and those patients would be like. It amazed me at how a lot of the patients looked like people I would see everyday! It made me really think. I learned a lot through this experience. Some of the people in these places just need someone to talk to... One of the most important things that I learned was not to stereotype people and also to reach out and help people who need it. I also learned how important community service is in helping a person grow. For me it was a very valuable experience.

...the experiences I had at the [nursing] home were very rewarding. I got a great deal of satisfaction out of what I accomplished as an individual. My day to day interaction with the elderly gave me a great deal of intrinsic satisfaction. It felt really good knowing that I had brought a little slice of joy into the hearts of the residents of the home. Individually it was a great learning experience, I felt that with every visit I learned something new...

Previous to my service work I had always stereotyped homes as being gloomy places where the elderly went to die... What I found was that a nursing home is a place where elderly people can go to get the love, care and respect they deserve.

Another welcome benefit of community service learning is in the area of communication skills (Nelms, 1991). Structured reflection on community service, unlike traditional writing assignments, encourages students to "read and write their world" by actively engaging them in the struggles of the real world (Greco, 1992). The study of ethical reasoning gives students direction and insight in their struggle to improve themselves and their communities. A minority student who worked in a soup kitchen and shelter for the homeless wrote in her journal:

During my two months of community service, I had developed a new perspective on the way that I treat people. I had never treated the home-less people with enough respect, if I had given them any at all. I [now] have a new outlook on things. I mean, I understand that it is not their fault for being in an unfortunate situation, and I wish that more would be done to help them. I think I have become a better person and this community service has help me to broaden my moral community in that I now include the homeless. This was a great task for me, because I think that I had become selfish in my ways. [I thought] that I was merely a product of my environment, but I can no longer use that as an excuse to justify my arro- gance...The experience has helped me to incorporate more self-respect for the homeless, and for myself...it feels good to have a part of me opened up, like a budding flower opens up its petals to eat the sunshine, in order that it will receive nourishment and reach its full potential.

The positive effect of community service learning on academic performance is especially encouraging. At-risk students who engage in community service as part of their curriculum have higher grades in language arts and mathematics, as well as fewer class absences (Levinson & Felberbaum, 1993; Hannah and Dworkowitz, 1992). Community service learning has also been found to be effective in preventing school dropout and in increasing employment placement opportunities and employment satisfaction upon completion of school of at-risk minority and immigrant youth as well as nontraditional adult education students (Adler & Cragin, 1993; Gordon, 1992).

Components of a successful ethics-based community service learning program

Moral development and moral reasoning is an important component of a person's self-concept as well as their ability to interact effectively within society. Consequently, to ignore students' growing concern with moral issues and their own moral development is to do them and the wider community a great disservice. Community service projects, on their own, are relatively ineffective in promoting moral and personal growth in students. (Boss, 1994) In order to be effective, community service learning needs to include the following elements:1) Community service; 2) Discussion of real-life ethical dilemmas; and 3) Personality development interventions (Rest, 1988). Teacher involvement is also an important component of a successful program.

It also has been found that moral development and personal growth in students is brought about by a combination of social and cognitive disequilibrium (Walker, 1986). Both types of disequilibrium are potentially present in a community service learning program. Social disequilibrium results from exposure to social experiences, such as homelessness and nursing homes, that differ radically from those students normally encounter. Cognitive disequilibrium results from exposure to "real-life"—as opposed to merely hypothetical or academic—ideas that conflict with the student's accepted world view. Some researchers argue that social disequilibrium may be even more important for moral development, especially in female students (Haan, 1985).

Service projects which create social disequilibrium need to be supplemented with opportunities for discussion of real-life dilemmas or sources of cognitive disequilibrium which engage students in active problem-solving of controversial moral issues. In addition, a study of developmental psychology and discussions of the personal meaning and relevance of the community service experiences helps students make the experience integrate the experiences into their personality.

1. Community service projects

The types of service projects chosen depend on several factors including community needs, availability, transportation and time, academic requirements, and student interest and ability. The involvement of the community, of students and their families, and of teachers and the administration are all important in establishing a successful service learning program.

Students should be provided with information on the service sites. This can be accomplished through the use of brochures, videos, speakers from the agencies or on-site visits. Some schools have centers or a staff person which help match students with community service agencies. Select potential service projects where students will come into direct contact with people in need. These projects might include soup kitchens, shelters for the homeless, day care centers, adult literacy classes, work in multicultural recreation centers, construction projects such as Habitat for Humanity, or work as mentors or tutors in elementary schools. If the students can have some input into the selection of a service site there is a greater probability of a successful match between the student and the community service agency.

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2. Discussion of real-life moral issues

In order to work toward successfully resolving moral dilemmas students first need a background in ethics and moral reasoning. Ethical instruction is often ignored in our schools because of the current emphasis on individual freedom and family autonomy over commitment to the group.

The traditional moral indoctrination approach, in which teachers or other authority figures impose values on young people, is generally regarded as unacceptable. Rather than helping students to become independent and critical moral thinkers, value indoctrination simply makes them more unquestioningly dependent on authority figures. It is difficult for teachers, because of their position of power and authority over students, to avoid using subtle forms of value indoctrination. Since the majority of teachers, like most North American adults, are at the society-maintaining stages of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1971), caution should be taken not to impose cultural standards which are not grounded in universal moral principles on students in the name of morality.

The values clarification or value neutral approach, which was touted as providing a compromise between individual freedom to believe as one pleases and the moral indoctrination approach, is equally unsatisfactory as a means of ethical education. It has been shown to have no significant effect on students' actual moral development and, indeed, may even hinder moral and social development. (Lovin, 1988; Gabler and Gabler, 1987). A values neutral approach often serves to "confirm" the more immature students' belief that morality is all relative and that anything goes as long as one believes its right for them—be it drug-dealing, gang

killings or helping out in a soup kitchen--thus leaving students feeling adrift in a world with no real values.

Psychologists such as Jean Piaget (1932), Lawrence Kohlberg (1971) and Carol Gilligan (1982) noted that people pass through different stages of moral development on their way to moral maturity. Moral development can be facilitated through exposure to certain experiences. Community service learning in particular has been found to be a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing a student's moral development. The progressive, developmental approach to ethics education involves neither imposing values on students nor tolerating destructive values. Rather it entails nurturing the student's natural moral sense through guided discussion of real-life experiences.

3. Personality development interventions

The third component of an effective community service learning program is personality development interventions. Exercises which encourage students to reflect on their service work and the different moral issues in their lives increase students' self-awareness as well as their moral sensitivity to the community around them. Journaling provides one of the best means for students to reflect on their service experience and their own personal development.

4. Teacher involvement

A fourth component--teacher involvement--should be added if the course is to be successful and satisfying not only for students but for the teacher as well. Teachers should become involved in community service themselves, either on their own or on-site with their students. The benefits of service learning on one's moral and social development is not limited to young people. Teachers as well as students can become entrenched in ethnocentric or egocentric world views. This can be particularly problematic if a teacher is working in a multicultural classroom. Indeed, some teacher training programs now recommend that community service be required for prospective teachers (Sullivan, 1993).

Conclusion

Community service learning, combined with a program of ethics education, is an effective means of enhancing students' personal and moral development as well as their academic performance. In a time when juvenile crime and school dropout rates are reaching epidemic proportions we can no longer afford to con-

tinue omitting ethical education from the curriculum. Nor can we afford to neglect the role our schools ought to be playing in serving the real needs of both students and the larger community.

Notes

1. All journal entries cited are from the community service journals of my ethics students. Their names are not used because of considerations of confidentiality.

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