

# TEACHING CHARACTER EDUCATION THROUGH SERVICE-LEARNING

by Mike Brugh

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My tenth grade science class was starting a unit on the "Ever Changing Earth." To get things going, I opened with a discussion about earthquakes and asked the class, "What would you do if an earthquake hit right now?" Students provided the expected answers ranging from hide under a desk, to stand in the doorway, to run outside. However, one student replied, "I would head to the mall." "The mall?," I asked. David replied, "Yeah, I would break into the jewelry store and make off with a load of gold." The statement caught me flat on my feet, I would have never expected this student to be thinking in this way.

And so it was, once again I was made aware that my job as a teacher was more than just a provider of content knowledge, that in fact, my job was to educate the whole child to include civic responsibility, citizenship, and good character. And in order to do this, my students would need to have an understanding of far more than what was contained inside the covers of their physical science textbook. This thinking created a real dilemma for me. Even if I was to identify what they needed to know to develop good character, how would I ever go about teaching them science and character education?

## CHARACTER EDUCATION STANDARDS

The knowledge, skills and abilities associated with a student developing good character have always been valued by educators and society, and nearly everyone agrees that this is critical to creating a fully educated adult, prepared to participate in a democratic society. Theodore Roosevelt is quoted as saying, "To educate a man in mind

identifying what students should know and be able to do and then to take them from where they are to where they should be. The content of character education should be treated no differently. Thomas Lickona (1996) describes three dimensions or "Components of Good Character;" Moral Knowing, Moral Feeling and Moral Action. Correspondingly, others describe these three dimensions in terms of "habits" of character development; Habits of the Mind, Habits of the Heart, and Habits of Behavior. In either case, the lists of personal characteristics represented by these dimensions contain any number of personal characteristics from altruistic to zealous. But what should be taught? One area that everyone seems to agree upon is the need for students to develop a sense of civic responsibility. This aspect of character education cuts across all three of the dimensions mentioned above. To develop this sense students must know of moral reasoning and decision making. They must have respect for themselves and respect for others, and finally they must take action and behave as a contributing member of the community.

## TEACHING CHARACTER EDUCATION

As school and district personnel across the state and nation grapple with developing content and performance standards for the traditional subject areas such as math, English, history and science they will also hopefully start a similar process for character education. When they are close to finishing this activity someone, somewhere at sometime will eventually ask, "Now that we have these character education standards, how are we going to teach them?" The answer to this question is a challenge

**Theodore Roosevelt is quoted as saying, "To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society."**

and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." However, many take a less proactive approach and assume that the development of good character will happen naturally through an educational process that may occur at home or school. Public education has always been based upon

for the traditional disciplines and is surrounded with great confusion when it comes to "teaching" character education. The "quick fix" on answering this question is to do what educators typically do when confronted with adding new content - they create a new class. For example, when

educators found that students needed to be better problem solvers they quickly moved to create a class called "Problem Solving." A few years ago, a well intended principal called me on the phone and wanted to know if I had any good examples of "problem solving classes." I told him yes, and that they are called history, math, science, physical education .... This of course was not the answer he wanted to hear. Character education is not a "thing" to be "added on" to the curriculum, neither as an additional course or a separate unit in a course. Civic responsibility, for example, cannot be completely understood and learned by reading about any number of civically responsible people and then answering the questions at the end of the chapter or writing a paper. Civic responsibility is best learned when students are placed in civically responsible situations that allow them to become responsible. Many times the answer to our question will never come because we are asking the wrong question. In the dilemma I experienced above I should have asked, "How will I teach them the subject content and in the process help them develop good character?"

Students participating in a bilingual education class at Sequoia High School (Clark, D. 1993) started a physical science unit on geology, including lessons on earthquakes and plate tectonic theory. The content objectives were very much the same as the "Ever Changing Earth" unit mentioned above. However; there was something very different about how the students were going about their learning. The classes visited an office for emergency disaster management to understand the scale of natural disasters and learned that many individuals in their community were not prepared for an earthquake or natural disaster. Students identified this lack of preparedness as a need that they could address. They began to put together earthquake preparedness kits with information printed in languages reflected in their community. Based upon their understanding of scientific principles, students gathered materials and worked with agency representatives to compile information and create instructional materials on the computer in both English and their native languages. Working in teams with staff members from the disaster management agency, the students went door to door distributing the kits and information in their neighborhoods. As a class, the students discussed in small groups and wrote in their journals about what they had learned and how they had contributed to the community. They had in fact learned about the "Ever Changing Earth" through engaging in a "service-learning" activity and in the process of doing this activity an opportunity was created for them to develop their sense of civic responsibility, citizenship and good character.

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## WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING?

Service-learning is a teaching method that answers the question of, "How will I teach them the subject content and in the process have them develop good character?" In the past, considerable learning occurred through hands-on experience at the side of a father or mother, within the context of the community, friends and neighbors. Young people used to assume increased levels of responsibility gradually as they grew into adulthood. Over time, however, the classic agrarian models of apprenticeship and mentoring by adults have given way to the isolation of young people in youth-only educational, social, and employment groupings. Unlike earlier generations, it is easy for today's adults to treat young people as objects, as problems, or as the recipients (not the deliverers) of services. Service-learning reverses these trends. When teachers integrate service into the curriculum, students are deeply immersed in the learning, and therefore, gain an individualized understanding of the concepts contained in the curricular subject areas. Students learn and practice elements of character. They learn responsibility by being responsible. They practice respect, show caring, and are viewed as being trustworthy. They learn to communicate, to solve problems, to think critically, and to exercise other higher-order skills when they play an active role in selecting and developing their own service-learning projects to benefit the community.

The terms, "community service" and "service-learning" are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct concepts. A key focus of community service activities is to foster an ethic of civic responsibility. As defined by the National Youth Leadership Council (1992), "com-

munity service simply means volunteering done in the community." When community service is integrated with cur-

riculum standards it becomes service-learning. Put another way, service-learning is an instructional strategy that uses the power of community service to achieve educational goals. Adding time for reflection on community service activities is often the first step toward transforming community service into service-learning but more is required to achieve meaningful curriculum integration (California Department of Education, 1996).

### Critical Elements

Service-learning capitalizes on the service experience to connect "service" in the community to the core curriculum. The service experience provides a context for students and teachers to create meaningful learning experiences. The following five service-learning elements are

identified in the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. All five elements must be evident in order for an activity to be classified as high quality service-learning:

- It is a method whereby students learn through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of their community
- It is integrated into and enhances the academic / core curriculum of the students
- It is coordinated with an elementary school (K-6), secondary school (7-12) and institutions of higher education, a local service program or various other agencies within the community
- It helps foster civic responsibility and youth involvement
- It provides structured time for students to reflect on the service-learning experience

### **School-Community Partnerships**

Service-learning is both service in the interest of the community and service in the interest of learning. Both components are essential. The service meets actual community needs and the service experiences are integrated into the academic / core curriculum in ways that provide the participants with structured opportunities to reflect on the meaning of their service activity. Moreover, service-learning suggests that we view young people, not as "passive recipients" or "consumers" of education, but as "competent, capable producers and willing contributors" (Caskey, 1991).

Parents, educators, representatives from local government and community-based organizations, and students are essential partners in developing high quality ser-

vice-learning experiences. In order to assure success, each must understand and be supportive of the concept of service-learning. Parents provide access to multilingual communities, assistance with project development, and are able to work side-by-side with their children doing service-learning activities as well as sharing in the reflection process. Community outreach efforts must acknowledge the needs of the community and draw the connection between those needs and how young people engaged in service-learning can help address them. These key stakeholders should understand that schools are not "mandating volunteerism." Service-learning is an instructional strategy that provides students with the opportunity to apply and to demonstrate classroom learning in a meaningful way; community involvement is integral to the learning experience. Such preparation and involvement can prevent incidents that have occurred in a few states where lawsuits were filed against schools with community service requirements for graduation based on "involuntary servitude" and violation of 13th Amendment rights. To date, the courts have found that requiring service does not violate Constitutional or statutory requirements, but that service-learning is an educational enterprise with clear relations to the citizenship mission of the schools (Herndon vs. Chapel Hill, 1995).

### **CALIFORNIA'S SERVICE-LEARNING AGENDA**

In March, 1996 the California State Board of Education resolved that "learning through service provides a powerful learning experience for students to master the core and elective curriculum." Consistent with the Board's statement, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Delaine Eastin stated "All students should have a real taste of the real world and an opportunity to improve their communities through participating in service learning during their K-12 education. This will help them become improved learners, better workers and active citizens" (California Department of Education, 1996). As part of an eight-year vision, the Challenge School District Reform Initiative outlines two strategic goals for service-learning: (1) by the year 2000, 25 percent of all districts will offer community service or service-learning as part of their educational program; and (2) by the year 2004, 50 percent of all districts will include service-learning as part of their regular instructional practice, and engage students in at least one service-learning experience at each grade span (K-5, 6-8, and 9-12) before matriculation or graduation.

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### **EXAMPLES OF SERVICE-LEARNING ACTIVITIES**

**Project HAWK** (Habitat Alliance and Wildlife Keepers) engages Yolo County students in the restoration of Cache Creek through the development of a 30 acre habitat regeneration and environmental learning center on Cache Creek. Since the program's inception, students have

expanded the term habitat to include their classrooms, schools and community. As a result, student initiated projects include a three acre Urban Garden and Learning Center, two child care projects (one at Westside Elementary School and the other at Woodland Community High School). In addition students develop their language arts skills through the writing of grant proposals, and utilizing technology to produce computer-generated videos, and presentations to conferences and local agencies (Bailey 1997).

In response to a need expressed by community members, an elementary school weaves an ongoing service project with the elderly at a nearby senior care facil-

Brandeis University and Abt Associates (1997) have recently published results from their national study that evaluated high quality service-learning programs in nine states, including California. Nearly every indicator showed positive results; students were more engaged in school, grades improved in core subjects, there was increased interest in getting a college degree, greater personal and social responsibility and acceptance of cultural diversity was demonstrated, and students were more likely to volunteer in the community.

The California Department of Education is completing a three year state wide evaluation conducted by

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ity into the science and history-social science curriculum of a fourth grade class. In science, the students study human anatomy and the aging process; in history-social science, the students organize a “fashion show” for their elderly friends that includes Native American apparel and jewelry. During the narration, they describe California’s geography, the location of various tribes, their way of living and adaptation to the environment, qualities of the culture and contributions as a way of demonstrating understanding of part of California’s history. In addition, activities such as reading to their senior friends and transcribing letters to family members reinforce the reading and writing skills of the fourth grade students. The students have created a video scrapbook that reflects what they experience and accomplish through their service-learning activities.

#### RESEARCH ON SERVICE-LEARNING

Current educational research suggests that students learn better and in more depth when they are allowed to construct their own understanding, learn within a knowledge base and do work that has value or meaning to themselves and others (Brnat, 1995). Service-learning is one teaching method that creates this kind of learning experience.

John Dewey pointed out many years ago that there is a difference between knowledge and learning. Much research has occurred in the area of brain based learning and the results are very supportive of service-learning. In their book, *Making Connections, Teaching and the Human Brain*, Renate and Geoffrey Cain (1994) point out that emotion and cognition cannot be separated. Service-learning provides the emotional context for learning – it makes learning real and resulting in real learning.

RPP International and the Search Institute (1997) is examining impacts of service-learning on students, teachers, schools and communities in 12 of the 36 CalServe funded school-community partnerships. In a recent report the evaluators noted teacher responses which indicated improved student knowledge of the community and its issues, increased student sense of responsibility to the school, and improved self-esteem and self-confidence. The final report scheduled for release in spring 1998 will present further findings on these and other areas.

#### CONCLUSION

Like many other educational objectives, character education cannot be taught out of context, and it is best learned through experience. The service-learning teaching method is one way to answer the call to create learning opportunities that are “meaningful, challenging, value-based, integrative and active” (NCSS vision statement). Through service-learning the traditional teaching and learning environment is expanded past the teacher and the student to include others in the community. When this happens it can create expanded meaning for the student (and teacher) and a whole new reason to learn. It answers those critical questions so many of my students asked, “Why do I need to learn this?” and “When will I ever use it?” Students engaged in service-learning activities never ask these questions because “they” are creating the context and meaning for their learning.

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### Resources

**California Department of Education (CDE) - CalServe Initiative**, Family and Community Partnerships Office / CalServe  
721 Capitol Mall, 3rd Floor, Sacramento, CA 95814  
call (916) 657-5442 fax (916) 657-4969; or  
WWW: //goldmine.cde.ca.gov/cyfsbranch.htm  
Contact: Mike Brugh, CalServe Coordinator  
E-MAIL: mbrugh @smp.cde.ca.gov

### National Service-Learning Clearinghouse

R290 VoTech, 1954 Buford Avenue  
St. Paul, MN 55108  
PH: (800) 808-SERV  
E-MAIL: serve@maroon.tc.umn.edu

In California contact:

Lisa Friedman  
Constitutional Rights Foundation  
601 South Kingsley  
Los Angeles, CA 90005  
PH: (213) 487-5590  
FAX(213) 386-0459

or

Cathleen Micheaels  
East Bay Conservation Corps  
1021 Third Street  
Oakland, CA 94607  
PH: (510) 891-3900  
FAX: (510) 272-9001

**Youth Service California, Regional Networks for Youth Service and National Service:** 754 Sir Frances Drake Blvd., Suite 8, San Anselmo, CA 94960  
PH: (415) 257-3500 FAX: (415) 257-5838  
E-MAIL: Carolina@yscal.org  
Contact: Carolina Abuelo, Regional Network Manager

NOTE FROM THE GUEST EDITOR: For more articles on service-learning, refer to the Spring/Summer 1997 / Volume 36, No. 2 issue of the Social Studies Review titled Service Learning.