



**Service Learning:
Strategies for Developing Character**

*By MindOH! Guest Author
Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A.
National Service Learning Consultant*

September 2005



Service Learning: Strategies for Developing Character

Simply put, service learning connects school-based curriculum with the inherent caring and concern young people have for their world—whether on their school campus, at a local food bank, or in a distant rainforest. With the recent devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, young students are especially attuned to how we as a nation, truly rely on the spirit and actions of volunteers to bring both essentials for daily living and to restore hope.

The results of participating in service, whether inspired by tragedies observed on television or developed in a classroom to establish relevance and meaning to subject matter, are memorable lifelong lessons for students that foster a stronger society for us all. When this becomes part of a school culture repeated in a variety of classes affording a range of experiences and opportunities, students gain the intrinsic motivation to participate in community.

Intrinsic. This is the key word to character education. If students continue to rely on outside, extrinsic reinforcement for motivation, we are lost as a society. Instead, with service learning, we engage students, involve them, assist them in developing plans and visions and ideas that they then see placed into action and, voila! Something happens, something changes. They are a part of this change. And along with the external change made by reading aloud to children, interviewing elders to document their lives, putting together food packages for hurricane evacuees, restoring a wetland, writing a booklet on how to do a better food drive – along with the impact they see and experience, they change. They experience growth of character. They learn about how to work with others, the meaning of persistence, how to survive setbacks and disappointment, what it feels like to be depended upon. This will not occur through hypothetical situations. This occurs when learning and service connect, and the teacher is the model of this process. This is what service learning can look like.

Students research the myths of aging. They discover how older people often feel isolated and disconnected from family members by distance. They read young adult novels about kids they can relate to who also experience feelings of alienation. They interview elders and find out they often lack knowledge to use computers. After thoughtful preparation and practice, and in collaboration with a senior community center, the teens schedule computer labs for elders. With their new email skills, the elders keep in touch with their young teachers long after the sessions were complete. Students develop conversational skills, manners, and respect for others.

A humanities class wants to make a mural on an outside wall. They read biographies and at first want to represent their favorite characters. A student suggested finding real people in the



community to honor and others agree. They create public service announcements to promote their search on the local radio station and in neighborhood newspapers seeking nominations. They select eight people who represent the community's diversity and who contribute regularly to the well-being of their communities. Students conduct interviews, make sketches of their honorees, and with the help of a local artist, complete a ten-foot mural and booklet of stories about their process. They learn about resiliency, honor, and discover many ways that actions can benefit others. They find out that, as Arthur Ashe said, "From what you get you make a living; what you give, however, makes a life."

After a food bank relocated, the coordinator visits a class and describes how sterile and unwelcoming the new waiting area appears with its rows of chairs and bare white walls. The students make posters and art work to decorate the rooms and create a child-care area stocked with donated art supplies and original picture books by this classroom of now published authors! Students learn that their talents and skills have value, and that doing what they enjoy – making art – can beautify their surroundings. They also find out that by asking others what is needed, they find out what is not readily observed: that young children who accompany their parents to this food bank may sit for hours with no activity. They responded with a child activity center.

These examples illustrate the potential that can evolve as students apply their skills, talents and knowledge for the common good, while engaging in academic content. When service learning is used in a structured way that connects classroom content, literature, and skills to community needs, students will:

- apply academic, social, and personal skills to improve the community
- make decisions that have real, not hypothetical, results
- grow as individuals, gain respect for peers, and increase civic participation
- experience success no matter what their academic ability level
- gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their community, and society
- develop as leaders who take initiative, solve problems, work as a team, and demonstrate their abilities while and through helping others.

These important and documented academic and social results have helped validate service learning as valuable, respected, and widely employed in K-12 and higher education classrooms. Service learning can be defined as a teaching method where guided or classroom learning is deepened through service to others in a process that provides structured time for reflection on the service experience and demonstration of the skills and knowledge required.



Why is Service Learning Important?

Service learning provides meaningful ways for students, teachers, administrators and community agencies and members to move together with deliberate thought and action toward a common purpose that has mutual benefits. Students benefit academically, socially, and emotionally; develop skills; explore numerous career options; and have a propensity to appreciate the value of civic responsibility and actively (and willingly) participate in their community. Teachers make school and education more relevant for their students, often seeing their students blossom and develop previously untapped strengths in the process, and may find themselves professional re-energized. Community partners receive much needed help and may find themselves learning from the students as they teach and interact with them.

By encouraging and supporting thoughtful civic involvement and participation by young people, the entire community benefits. Young people are acknowledged—and see themselves—as resourceful, knowledgeable, and agents of change who can harness their ideas, energy, and enthusiasm to benefit us all. This is character education in action!

Bringing Learning to Life

The beauty of service learning is something real and concrete is occurring. Learning takes on a new dimension. When students are engaged intellectually and emotionally with a topic, they can light up with a revelation that make a connection between two previously separate ideas. What they learn in school suddenly matters. Math, science, social studies, language, literature, the arts—all are applied, used, and placed in contexts where they really matter.

John Dewey said, “Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” To grow adults of able character requires us all to model and encourage participation in civic deeds. Service learning provides the design. All we as educators must do, is put the ideas and strategies into practice. If this idea seems daunting, know that across the country, countless teachers are involved, engaging their students in making significant contributions to others, with a myriad of benefits to all involved. In service learning lies the balance: the dynamic of combining learning and action, a thoughtful integration. A sense of purpose is here to be found, along with self-discovery, knowledge, and the ability to interact and improve our planetary home. This is character education civic brought to life.



About the Author

This article includes excerpts from *The Complete Guide to Service Learning—Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action* by Cathryn Berger Kaye, M.A. © 2004. Used with permission from Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 1-866-703-7322; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

As a National Service Learning Consultant, Cathryn presents keynotes and workshops for numerous organizations and state education agencies. She leads workshops for school districts, classroom teachers and administrators, and university faculty and teacher education students on a variety of issues such as service learning, character education, civic responsibility, student leadership, and establishing respectful school communities by reducing and eliminating name-calling and bullying. Cathryn can be contacted at cbkaye@aol.com or www.abcdbooks.org.