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Service Learning is the Great Connector

Jane Angelis

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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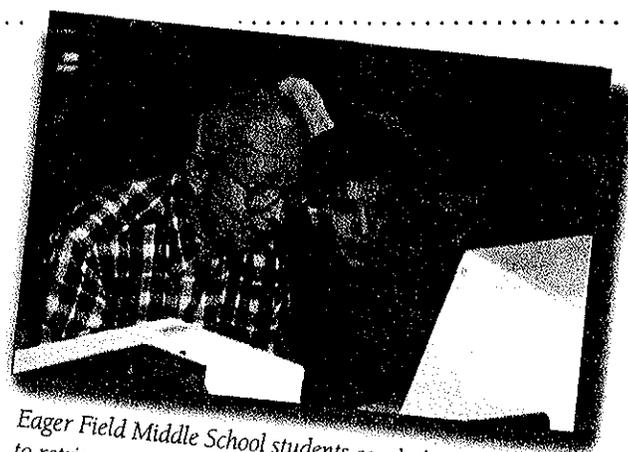
SERVICE LEARNING IS THE GREAT CONNECTOR

By Jane Angelis, Ph.D.,
Director
Intergenerational Initiative, and
Editor,
Continuance Magazine
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, Illinois

It isn't a coincidence that older people are flocking to learn about computers, the Internet, and E-mail. It's a part of the service-learning movement that has caught America's imagination. Why are older people, technology and service learning such natural partners? Ask a middle-school student who is teaching a computer class to older people. "Some senior citizens are afraid of computers in the beginning," he says, "But we know how to make them more comfortable." That confidence is the hallmark of service-

learning programs across the country involving elementary, middle school, high school, and college campuses. William Butler Yeats wrote that "Education isn't the filling of a pail, it is the lighting of a fire." Service learning leaves students fired up as they become active learners, solving real-world problems through community involvement.

What is service learning? You will find pages of definitions for service learning at the National Service Learning Clearinghouse. Our working definition is a composite—service learning is an instructional strategy that blends community service with academic learning. Emphasis is placed on reflection, active student participation, and connecting the curriculum to the real world.



Eager Field Middle School students coach their older student to retrieve an attachment on Eudora.

KEY CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION

Educators throughout the country are struggling with the lack of student engagement, graduates who are prepared neither for higher education nor for the world of work, and students who are isolated from civic activities. A *Nation of Spectators*, the final report from the National

Commission on Civic Renewal, describes the isolation and lack of involvement in our society that has resulted in schools that are mediocre for some students and catastrophic for others. According to Jim Kielsmeier of the National Youth Leadership Council, "The flourishing of civilizations has brought

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about unlimited wealth and comfort, and at the same time, impoverishment of the soul." Harold Howe, Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation, writes in *Service Learning*, A benchmark report from the U.S. Department of Labor, "The classrooms in both schools and universities are dominated by a passive learning process. Many classrooms neglect in-depth discussion, student responsibility for the learning of others, and efforts to relate what is studied to their own lives and the world they live in." The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report found that "more than half our young people leave school without knowledge or the foundation to find and hold a good job." Many of the students are so removed from education that they sleep through class, and that is the good news, because at least the teacher can teach rather than deal with disruptive behaviors. The critical question is, How can we engage students in their education?

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

Service learning is not the cure for everything, but the picture isn't as gloomy when schools are involved with service learning. Anne Bryant, Executive Director of the National School Boards Association says that "Service learning engages students in education, and helps connect their personal lives and community responsibilities with their own academic achievement." The National



Elvia Lee Steward discusses careers with Momence High School senior Maria Thompson.

Education Association passed a resolution "that learning through voluntary community service should be encouraged as an integral part of a student's education." Research for all levels of education shows varying degrees of

dynamic teacher and captivated the students with a discussion on water levels in a nearby lake.

Standards are the driving force for kindergarten through high school (K-12) curriculum in schools throughout the country.

Workforce skills are receiving increased attention in the curriculum as employers have problems finding qualified workers. Again the active-learning focus of service learning shines.

success including improvement in academic performance, attendance, and conduct, and a more positive view toward service and the community.

Educators say that the best way to learn something is to teach it. Students attest to their improvement in math, reading, and science, as a result of teaching or tutoring older adults, peers, or younger students. Teaching others gives students an opportunity to take greater responsibility and offers them a sense of ownership for their own learning. For example, a shy community college student found very little to say during his college class but when he was with elementary students he proved to be a

Standards identify specific academic knowledge and skills that students should learn as a result of their education. An example of service learning connected to standards can be readily seen at Field School in Northbrook, Illinois. The middle-school students begin by researching the views and attitudes about aging, writing about it, and doing a needs assessment with local senior citizens. One of the most common needs identified was the opportunity for seniors to learn about computers. So the students planned the computer instruction and organized a class. Through this intergenerational curriculum, the students confidently meet standards in

language arts, social sciences, mathematics, and science.

Workforce skills are receiving increased attention in the curriculum as employers have problems finding qualified workers. Again the active-learning focus of service learning shines. Samuel Halperin of the American Youth Policy Forum notes that, "the learner is not an object, a passive vessel, but, rather, a resource responsible for helping to shape his or her own learning, as well as a valuable contributor to the work of the community." Students, retirees, and teacher Linda Dvorak from Momence High School would agree. The students took responsibility for organizing a forum with retirees to discuss the ways that retirees could help young people prepare for careers. The students researched organizing a focus group, identified potential invitees, and helped facilitate the meeting. They practiced communication and management; and their journals reflect the importance of students' addressing authentic needs of the community.

In *Service Learning*, George Antonelli and Richard Thompson write that "Service is not only a learning experience but can be a protective factor in young people's lives. Young people who are given responsibilities behave responsibly." Students involved with service learning develop responsibility because it is a part of their curriculum and their educational experience. In a university course, *Critical Reading and Writing*, a university student was involved helping an older woman prepare for her GED. The university student was

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amazed with all she learned and said that service learning helped her discover that she could successfully teach something. "There is no better feeling than when the person you are mentoring accomplishes a goal."

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

In a growing number of states, service learning is viewed as an important part of the master plan for education. States are linking service learning to standards, academic performance, workforce preparation, and citizenship. These states believe that the student who has opportunities for meaningful service becomes a better-prepared citizen who contributes to the common good of the state. Unfortunately most service-learning programs are segmented into K-12 or higher education.

Service-learning is broader than just K-12 or higher education, it is a dynamic process that embraces and surrounds communities and weaves connections between them. In Illinois, the Joint Education Committee, a group comprised of 2 representatives of each educational board (K-12, community colleges, higher education, and workforce) is promoting service learning as a cooperative educational initiative, one that involves preschool through university and beyond; it is called a P-16 Partnership. Faculty and service-learning experts from all educational levels have joined representatives of Learn and Serve, Campus Compact, the Corporation for National Service, and the Intergenerational Initiative to foster this approach. Deputy Governor for Education Hazel Loucks says: "The P-16 Partnership is an ideal way to organize service learning throughout the state. Communication between all levels of education is increased, projects are mutually beneficial, and the result is a seamless system of education." Service learning gives educators at all levels an opportunity to talk to each other, tap one another's expertise, and share training, materials, web sites, and experiences.

SUMMARY

Whether it is reading, writing, math, communication, or a specific discipline, service learning helps students find meaning in their education and develop a positive view of their abilities. The strength of service learning lies in its ability to address the key issues and serve as the great connector between all who want to prepare students for the workforce, engage students in meaningful learning, and foster good citizens in our educational systems.

Service learning lights the fire of education! Once the fire dies down the ashes reveal the solid roots between education, communities, and people—the solid roots of the great connector.

Jane Angelis is Director of the Intergenerational Initiative, a project funded by the Illinois Board of Higher Education working to promote the involvement of older adults throughout the educational system. She is the Editor of Continuance Magazine, a quarterly that seeks to foster intergenerational understanding, and a member of the Illinois Service-Learning Task Force, a P-16 (preschool through higher education) Partnership supporting a seamless system of education. She can be contacted at ilii@siu.edu

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