

1995

Action Research in the Service of Learning

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Recommended Citation

Everett, Warren, "Action Research in the Service of Learning" (1995). *Special Topics, General*. Paper 75.
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ACTION RESEARCH IN THE SERVICE OF LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

-Alma High School has a 9th-12th grade student population of about 720 in a primarily rural setting in Michigan's middle-of-the-mitten. We are considered a low-economic area with more than 40% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunches. Some light industry remains, but what was the national center of mobile home production is completely gone as well as the linking industries. Student enrollment has dropped by nearly half over the last 20 years. In 1990, 9% of the 0-17 year-olds were Latino, most of whom were poor academic achievers. While our community has a prominent small college and a large professional group that promotes high standards, their children provide a great contrast to many who are isolated in poverty severe enough to affect opportunities to learn.

-I have operated community service programs with reflective follow-ups for students on an individual or small-group basis for more than 20 years. On rare occasion I have involved an advanced class in community service projects. None have ever been as gratifying or as successful with so many. Michigan's Public Act 25 reforming education here does call for Service-Learning to become integrated within our instructional process over the next two years. This has prompted me to investigate how best to implement it because I serve as a pre-K through 12 curriculum

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coordinator. Action Research is a logical process in assessing instructional program.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

-The control groups were two traditionally taught, content-driven American History classes of 11th graders. They were compared in some aspects to the Service-Learning, concept-driven World Affairs classes of 9th and 10th graders. The steering committee for the project were representatives from higher education, a student teacher, a college aid, two student aids per class and one 12th grader. We used a combination of techniques to monitor the progress of all classes. They included student and teacher initiated journals, cooperative-learning group reports, attendance data, critic friend observations and audio-tape interviews, video-taping, data collection matrices, teacher observations of the diverse classroom activities, and evaluation of the printed project resource booklet called "The Problem You Can't Bury." The matrices were teacher designed to not only examine the extent that students would report their traditional, transitional, and transformational learning experiences with built-in checks by the student, aid, and teacher to verify the validity of the responses and the reliability. The traditional class encouraged self-directed learning only on an

individual basis, rarely if ever on a group basis. The Service-Learning class encouraged self-directed learning for the individual, the group, and the whole class nearly all of the time. The World Affairs class conducted comparative studies about the storage/disposal of low-level radio-active waste on a global, national, state, and local basis. Data was collected on depth of understanding of content, goals and processes. Written and oral communication frequency (quantitative) as well as extrinsic/intrinsic criteria judgments(qualitative) were used to determine successes and failures in the project.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

-The Alma Public Schools' program outcome for social studies was successfully met within the mastery criteria established as follows:

- 1.) The program emphasized problem-solving strategies that included each of the base concerns stated in the outcome.
- 2.) The program was integrated with each of the academic disciplines and some of the fine arts and vocational disciplines.
- 3.) More than 90% of the participants worked as a team in developing their own ability to make informed and well-

reasoned decisions for the public good.

- 4.) The total involvement was inter-generational and multi-cultural.
- 5.) The program product, which is portfolio-ready when each student-participant adds individualized reflection, was achieved through coordinated, systematic learning. Much of the learning was student-initiated and self-directed.

-The instructional process that occurred produced some pleasant surprises for me as a teacher of traditional, content-centered social studies programs for the last 28 years:

- 1.) Fear of losing control prompted a tremendous surge of pre-planning as demonstrated on the specifically intentional calendar/journal for January, 1994. This demonstrates a high level of preparation compared to what I usually do for a class of this type. I planned as if the class had already started and I still had four weeks to go before I even met the students.
- 2.) Modelling my personal brain-storming session shown on the supporting sheets not only encouraged the students to conduct a similar kind of brain-storming with their own ideas shown as evidence on a student's journal sheet, it also automatically set my expectations of behavior which

they accepted. I had no behavioral problems often associated with highly active 9th and 10th graders aside from initial lack of enthusiasm for the project among the at-risk students as shown in Marylou's journal entry. Even this changed for the better as the students developed their own strategies for learning. When conducting S-L projects in the past, I had older students who were predominantly advanced in ability.

- 3.) A missionary zeal overtook the classes as if a virus had hit them. Ownership preceded student pro-activism and leadership. The classroom filled with competitive ideas and a struggle for meaning and role-task resulted almost naturally. They sought my advice for organization. They found comfort and meaning in groups with job-description as shown in Jamie's journal.
- 4.) Study took on a deeper sophistication and journal entries became more complex. Few students ever entered notes in their journal simply because I said it(lecture). Their entries were more self-directed and focused on whatever they saw as a goal related to the project. They did dialogue with each other. They became more articulate and confident.
- 5.) The debate idea, as the classes expressed it, resulted from their arguments over direction and purpose. Competing ideas had to be worked out. They did not, they said, want

to be embarrassed among the adults because of their inability to express themselves knowledgeably. They felt debate would prepare themselves and they would no longer feel intimidated by the adult world. They video-taped both informal and formal debates. The tapes show great preparation, screening, and organizational skills.

- 6.) The assessment matrix that I developed for the students was the result of three things. First, Alma Public Schools is developing, among other things, a "3-T" curriculum. I felt compelled to reflect that in all of my classes. Secondly, the S-L consortium of which I became a part, showed me the Data Collection Matrix. Finally, I put the matrix and the "3-T's" together so that I could assess student activity and help them become aware of their ability to ascend Bloom's levels of knowledge. The graphs presented to you show that students involved in the S-L project became more quantitatively expressive. That indicated students were more aware of their goals and more confident in writing about them when paired with the quality of their written statements as part of observation. Matrix entries show that even though the school budget cannot fund field-trips, the students persist and conduct a fund-raising project to finance the costs. The students proceeded to take ownership for the nuclear and conventional power plant visitations...something that might

not have happened had the trip remained as a hand-out.

- 7.) It is difficult to make special claims based on attendance when so many variables exist. But, it is necessary to show the data with explanation and qualification. The first semester of the school year has traditionally better attendance than second semester. During our second semester, however, our tough attendance policy collapsed because of an unwise change in State legislation and a threatened lawsuit locally. What is amazing to me is the improved attitude about tardiness in the second(Spring) semester under the above circumstances.
- 8.) The audio-tape interviews of students in the program by a "critical friend," Susan Root of Alma College. Certainly the depth of meaning in the hearts and minds of the student-participants is captured on this tape. The strength of Service-Learning can be measured in the answers to the questions by the students most directly involved. They are powerful and moving words as the students reveal what works and what they like about their project. They are involved actively. They do understand the project goals. They have invented a plan of action.
- 9.) Finally, the project booklet is the students' team goal to inform the public as experts on their subject. Each group in each class made their specific contribution which spans the levels of knowledge with recommendations for the future

as they show the real need for knowledge among teachers as well as students who are quoted from in-the-hallway interviews. The booklet is the capstone production of their creative skills. The font, the style, the format, the consultant resources all agreed upon for inclusion democratically.

PLAN OF ACTION

-The students intend the booklet from the project to be sent to the national, state, and local decision-makers in order to have their ideas and interest to be noticed so that the work is carried on more seriously than it has.

-I plan to use their success in learning as an example of how service-learning works with students of varied abilities. Their positive learning experience supports how classrooms should be run in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

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