Students Teaching Students: A Model for Service and Study

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When students teach each other, something magic happens. Professors and teachers alike spend much of their time trying to create connecting moments of inspiration when new ideas light up a student’s face (Duckworth, 1987). At LEAD USA, a non-profit organization in Williamstown, Massachusetts, we have found a way to increase the likelihood of these moments of enlightenment. We call it Students Teaching Students (STS). Students Teaching Students is an innovative curricular model in the tradition of John Dewey and Paulo Freire that provides college students with opportunities to design and teach their own courses for full academic credit.

Within the STS framework, students become empowered to make interdisciplinary connections and often choose to blend theory with practice. They develop creative solutions to global problems through focused academic courses. At the University of Notre Dame, “Conscience in the Crossfire: An Analysis of Violence and the Search for Alternatives” opened dialog between Peace Studies and R.O.T.C. students, and “Recovering Our Education” enabled students at the University of Vermont to examine environmental justice.

One popular approach to STS includes a component of Community Service Learning. In this paper, we will start with an examination of one LEAD model, the Berkshire Energy Project at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts. We then will examine how students define their own learning goals, the necessity of granting academic credit for community service learning, and ways to avoid problems of inequity and patronization between volunteers and clients.

**STUDENT DIRECTED CSL**

The Community Service Learning Project (CSLP) developed by LEAD USA offers students an opportunity to make community service an integral part of their academic experience. As future leaders, today’s students require the understanding, skills, confidence, and motivation necessary to take actions that will ensure a sustainable and secure world. Based on LEAD’s model of Students Teaching Students, CSLP seeks to bring both the understandings of global issues and a framework for action to a diverse group of students.

Students design their own syllabus for a full-credit, student-run course, and teach it to and with their peers. They undertake the long and often difficult process of defining a focus of study through the development of a working committee. They meet regularly as a group to agree and disagree about what is relevant. The students concurrently meet individually with faculty advisors for suggestions about possible course materials and teaching techniques. Yet the focus and the process of a course is student driven. Often students look to faculty for suggestions after they have completed extensive research.

We have observed that it is most effective when students rotate teaching and learning roles, but there are as many possible approaches as there are students. On the first day of a regular full-credit class, students determine the ground rules for the semester. Often students supplement their course work by designing and participating in a service project related to the topic of study. Community service is no longer marginalized; it becomes a vital part of the students’ education.

While many colleges and universities have long recognized the importance of integrating campus life with the life of the surrounding community, the rigorous academic component of CSLP makes this project unique. Volunteer service is taken back to the classroom where it is researched, analyzed, evaluated, and reflected on. Then, students apply their findings not only to the immediate problems of their own community, but to the wider context of problems in the global community. Students decide if CSL will become part of the class agenda. Projects are selected based on student interest and needs assessments.

In community service learning, students become teachers providing one type of service and clients become teachers by returning another type of service. Since college students are “transient residents,” clients have much to share about local history and culture. Students also often comment about how their eyes were opened to the real world through their interaction with community members. Finally, clients are encouraged to participate in the evaluation of services provided and of
the project as a whole. Students reflect on these evaluations over the course of a semester and try to incorporate improvements into their service work.

The Berkshire Energy Project, one such CLSP begun in the fall of 1991, addresses the energy needs of low-income residents of northern Berkshire County, Massachusetts, by providing basic weatherization services. The two essential components of BEP are service and study:

- Students work with and instruct community members in conserving techniques, implementing energy efficiency, and networking with other community organizations.
- Students supplement their field experience by teaching a course that includes the development of leadership skills, scientific and technological knowledge as related to energy, and a greater understanding of the implications of energy use on the local, national and global levels.

Through CLSP, students make a vital link between classroom activities and real experiences in the community. These connections allow students to enhance their awareness of their presence in the community, an awareness that leads to compassion and further action. The project provides students with a vehicle to exercise initiative, group management, and creative problem solving, while strengthening a sense of community. BEP seeks to make students aware of the actual and potential impact their presence has on their community and the world, putting into practice the often mentioned notion of acting locally while thinking globally. Uniquely, BEP asks students to define their own goals. Through the Students Teaching Students component, students take responsibility for their education by teaching and evaluating their own work. Students throw off the yoke of passive learning as they actively embrace their own education and define their own goals.

The notion of students defining their own goals seems radical and obvious at the same time. Perhaps it seems radical because we are familiar with teachers telling students what to do. Perhaps, too, it is obvious because students' own learning goals are more relevant, encourage more and better participation, and instill a greater sense of accomplishment. Students grow as they become leaders. In creating new systems to solve problems creatively, they reach past reinventing the wheel. Moving past an assembly line approach to education, students develop the skills necessary to solve an entire set of complex problems from beginning to end. Their skills are reapplied and reinvigorated. They inject a vitality into learning through self-inspired creativity.

Because we feel that students defining their own goals are so crucial to the development of a community service learning project, it is essential that their work is supported. The clearest sign of support in an academic context, along with moral and financial support, is the award of full academic credit. The granting of academic credit validates the project and offers much to students, clients, faculty, and the institution of higher education alike. It demarginalizes the service part of course work and firmly places it along with the more traditional disciplines of the humanities and the sciences.

Students as the focus, designers, and implementers of community service learning projects have much to gain from their service, work, and studies. Community Service Learning Projects offer a unique opportunity for students to channel their frustration with social realities and inequities into sustainable change. Unfortunately, out of a structure that recognizes community service as simply good works, the rewards are seen as intrinsic or are often too subtle. The CLSP gives students a legitimate and formally recognized framework to support the important sense of accomplishment and self-worth derived from working effectively within a group to help others.

Community Service Learning provides a wide range of opportunities. In our experience, it makes volunteer service possible for non-traditional, part-time, and other alternative students. By recognizing the value of CLSP, academic institutions open up the field of community service to students who might otherwise not have the freedom to serve.

On a subtle level, Community Service Learning Projects open avenues for the development and refinement of leadership skills in individuals. Currently there are many leadership positions available on college campuses, yet as a majority of leaders hold more than one office, many students are left out of the leadership loop. Repeatedly, we have seen soft-spoken and thoughtful students rise to the occasion and rally their peers through and around service. One young man at Williams College particularly stands out as an example. He became involved with the founding of the Berkshire Energy Project, attended LEAD's annual Summer Institute, and currently is an active member of BEP.

Finally, Community Service Learning Projects serve as a much-needed bridge between theory and practice, between academics and action. With all the current and past emphasis on experiential education and with all the emphasis of cooperative learning, classroom strategies have a difficult time of making it out of the class and into the institution as a whole. Community Service Learning in a formally recognized context promises the possibility of bringing together students with different backgrounds, perspectives, and agendas to work together on common causes. It also works against some of the degradation that students in vocationally based programs have faced. Finally, it realizes all the above-mentioned goals while meeting clients needs.
Faculty Perspective

On first glance, faculty seem to have a love/hate relationship with the notion of Community Service Learning paired with Students Teaching Students. Some hesitate to surrender their class, their control over subject matter, or their free time. With student commitment and a little convincing though, most faculty come to embrace the importance of Community Service Learning Projects. Assistant Professor Todd Whitmore of the University of Notre Dame said,

The LEAD experience is unequivocally valuable for the student. It had the organizational basis for giving bright, self-motivated, innovative students independence. The STS program has the institutional mechanism to allow them to pursue their interests and get credit at the same time. In addition, offering it under the auspices of a course allows the student to focus his/her time and energy on something they are interested in.

Faculty help students set realistic goals, get recharged from their students’ energy, advise students and encourage and support the implementation of ideas.

Based on our own anecdotal evidence, students come back from Students Teaching Students and Community Service Learning Programs excited and more informed about their own learning. Kulik and Yaskulka (1987, p. 107) assert that “Students taking these courses devoted unusually high levels of energy and participation while developing critical leadership skills. Many graduates asserted that these courses were among their most important learning experiences at college.” Former CSLP leaders assume similar leadership roles in their more traditional, faculty-run classes. Certainly they are more participatory and less satisfied with “banking” approaches to education where faculty deposit ideas in student’s empty minds. Experiencing the ups and downs of the many tasks involved in teaching, students have more respect for their teachers. The changes relating to students, however, are not the only benefits for faculty. There are clear and direct implications for their work.

By supporting students in Community Service Learning Projects, faculty strengthen what they themselves are often trying to do in their classes. Interested in making connections between theory and practice, and dedicated to helping students do the same, they have a unique instrument that supports their other work. The valuing, and serious consideration afforded to both, prepares students for a broader, more effective and connected type of education for the 21st century. Community Service Learning, by its nature, lends itself to interdisciplinary studies. The possibilities for connecting people across isolated departments and for encouraging comprehensive approaches to problem solving is tremendous.
The classes, at their best, are self-sustaining. At the University of Notre Dame, Williams College, the University of New Hampshire, and Pitzer College, students who have had good experiences in STS classes have proceeded to refine and develop new classes. Institutionally, these colleges and others have granted students credit using various mechanisms including independent studies, directed readings and group independent studies. Each college and university has different procedures for granting credit, however all approaches include presenting an academically rigorous syllabus, gathering faculty and administrator support, and meeting with a curriculum committee. Students have earned credit in many academic areas from political science to environmental studies to economics to women’s studies to English to history.

As students develop new leadership skills and start to approach their own learning differently, so can faculty. The potential for inservice training is staggering. Typically, relationships are created where students and faculty can learn much from each other. The very way professors teach will likely change out of these experiences. As Page Smith (1990, p. 16) states, “If I were the head of an institution now, I would push for more student taught courses. Students are far more capable of educating each other than they have been given credit for. They love to do it, and when students have gotten faculty support or sponsorship for courses, they’ve done a superior job.”

As study abroad options or other special programs often distinguish one college from another, so can an institutionalized Community Service Learning Program. At many campuses, community service is housed within career centers in the more traditional role of internships. This is just the beginning; CSLP is often interdisciplinary. Community Service Learning also offers institutions with limited resources many opportunities for a wide-range of individually designed courses within existing departmental frameworks.

Finally, Community Service Learning Projects can be extraordinarily cost-effective. By taking a student-centered approach, faculty time that might be spent preparing for or conducting classes can be spent on other projects. Students taking on the role of teacher functionally change faculty-to-student ratios. The courses themselves are also economical and sustainable. Structurally, Students Teaching Students is designed so that classes are easily passed from one group of students to the next. In a number of cases, that transition is quite simple. Maggie O’Shaughnessy, a student at Notre Dame commented, “Students that had a really good experience one semester are eager to share their experiences. It becomes easier to plan a course. We were even able to keep the reading packet cost to twenty dollars.” Students are keen to share their empowerment experiences and train their peers. Often, the most effective leaders come out of a situation where their peers nurture their development over one or two semesters. Many soft-spoken students who enroll during the first open class go on to design their own classes later.

From every perspective, Community Service Learning Projects and Students Teaching Students provide wonderful opportunities to all involved. For students, the ties established between theory and practice are empowering and lead to active learning and the development of leadership skills. For faculty, the implications for recharged students and the possibilities for interdisciplinary studies are exciting. Finally, for administrators and institutions as a whole, the chance for staff training, the potential for marketing, and the sustainable and cost-effective side of Community Service Learning are very attractive.

CHALLENGING INEQUALITY

For all the positive aspects of Community Service Learning, there is one specific concern that needs to be addressed before these types of programs can be implemented effectively. All too often, naïve “good works” risk creating a patronizing relationship between volunteers and clients. Particularly, this occurs when institutions of higher education are seen as ivory towers. It is important that all involved are aware and trained to avoid the slippery slope of being insensitive to clients. Paying lip service is not enough.

At LEAD, we approach the danger of inequity and the possibility of patronizing relationships on two levels. Structurally and through training, it is very important to design a program with checks and balances. It helps to avoid misunderstandings and make sure the services delivered are appropriate. We teach our students five basic phases. While each group of students approaches them differently, in our experience, checking in weekly on all five is invaluable.

- Survey: Students should conduct a survey to see what needs are unanswered in a community.
- Inventory: Students should research what services are currently being offered by what organizations. Other organizations are also a valuable resource for evaluating community needs.
- Training: Students often need to be trained in the skills required for service. How to weatherstrip a home, insulate a water heater, or tutor refugees in English are often new skills. Students also need to be trained in being sensitive, recognizing and working with differences.
- Publicity: By sharing information, students help to educate the community as a whole. They also get public support for their work.
• Documentation and Evaluation: Whether documenting work to learn from past accomplishments and mistakes or supporting fund raising efforts, it is critical to evaluate student Community Service Programs. There tends to be a high turnover among students, and written records help define future program directions.

From a structural standpoint, recognizing important aspects of a program are easy. The trick lies in referring to those five points regularly. Perhaps, though, even what is more important and certainly more difficult to implement are the regular use of personal and in-service training.

One of the most frequent criticisms of community service programs is the patronizing or condescending attitude that many volunteers have towards their clients. Although unintentional, this relationship only works to make situations awkward for all involved. Training requires an initial investment of time as well as a strong determination to overcome these prejudices. It is likely that this problem will never be completely solved, but it can be changed drastically to make both volunteers and clients more comfortable.

We recommend some kind of prejudice reduction work. BEP worked with the National Coalition Building Institute, which proved successful. There are many other types of effective prejudice reduction and sensitivity trainings available. Regardless of the choice, keep in mind that to be effective, the trainings should last from three hours to an entire day. Cherie R. Brown (1992) of NCBI proposes five key steps in reducing prejudice.

- Identifying the information and misinformation we have learned about other groups—to admit our programming and confront prejudice head on.
- Identifying and expressing pride in the groups to which we belong—to affirm our identity and background.
- Learning how groups other than our own experience mistreatment—to share what it’s like to be part of a mistreated group and to share what they experience.
- Learning the personal impact of specific incidents of discrimination—to share personal stories in which discrimination led to a hurtful experience.
- Learning how to interrupt prejudicial behavior in yourself and others—to assist yourself and others to apply a new sensitivity to specific situations, particularly in service work.

No program offers a panacea for problems of patronizing attitudes in service, but it is possible to take steps in reducing that type of behavior. Prejudices are learned early in life; it takes a lifetime to break them down.

The steps to implementing an effective Community Service Learning Program are not easy. Having its goals be student driven adds some complications and excitement. Yet when students tie service to their studies, their interest, level of participation, and commitment to learning radically change. Students have much to gain from Community Service Learning, particularly when they receive academic credit for their work and when they acknowledge their own prejudices and cultural assumptions.

REFERENCES


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