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Service-Learning, Diversity, and Literacy Programs

By Katherine Delo and Bob Seidel

any service-learning practitioners are familiar with the anecdote about the affluent college student who said, "I had such a wonderful experience serving soup to the homeless; I hope that my children can have the same experience." In a tutoring context, she might have said, "I hope that my children will still have the chance to tutor less fortunate children."

What's wrong with these pictures? Providing service without adequate preparation, support, and opportunities to process the experience can lead to badly flawed learning on the part of the service provider. Learning will happen, but it may be false learning, reinforcing naïve or stereotyped assumptions. This can have serious implications for the service recipient as well.

Applying service-learning principles to literacy programs cannot guarantee positive experiences, but it can help address a wide range of diversity-related issues and meet program goals. In fact, whether or not they present themselves as "service-learning," many programs understand that: (1) tutors often have much to learn if they are to be effective; and (2) effective tutors learn much through their experience. Issues may arise when tutors are different from their students in terms of age, race, class, ethnicity, gender, abilities, and other characteristics that may affect their experience and ability to communicate with each other. In these situations, programs use methods that make the service experience a positive learning opportunity for both service providers and service recipients.

Program staff needs to work with community partners to develop tutor training that addresses a comprehensive array of issues during pre-service training as well as through ongoing reflection activities.

As an example, consider the case where a relatively affluent, white college student tutors a low-income, African-American third-grade student. To maximize tutoring effectiveness, the tutor needs to know some things not only about teaching reading, but also about the third-grader's household, neighborhood, and school environment. Similarities and differences in the use of language in the student's and the tutor's respective subcultures and other cultural differences—especially concepts of self, community, knowledge, and authority—should also be addressed. Community partners, perhaps from the student's school or after-school program, can play a leading role in orienting tutors on these matters.

In fact, tutors may have to spend considerable time with the younger students even to become ready to discuss meaningfully why reading is important. If lifelong learning is the goal, we need to help our youth find their own reasons to read. Young readers need exposure to literature that is relevant and, to the extent practical, of their own choosing. To facilitate such exposure, tutors need more than a list of readings. They need to be prepared to listen to the individual child, to accept values other than their own, in short, to *learn* as much as possible about the younger student's experiences and point of view.

Listening effectively and accepting difference are not easy things to do for many of us, whether in tutoring or any other aspect of our lives. A tutoring program can facilitate tutors' learning by providing organized opportunities for tutors to meet and share experiences in structured discussions aimed at improving their effectiveness. Such discussions may include tutees and other community partners. These conversations should be integral to the program, not an optional add-on, because they contribute both to the quality of the tutoring and to the education of the tutors themselves.

Effective service-learning may also foster civic responsibility. Tutors may find themselves learning about public schools and education policy. Using reflection to discuss such topics may help tutors better understand relevant issues and see other ways to address their concerns. They may even be able to work with the students they tutor to do so. This need not be limited to education issues. If a student learns to read by reading about a problem in her community, she may want to pursue that interest further by becoming active in the community. Such activities can make tutors and students partners in action, where each brings knowledge and experience that they can use together.

These are just a few thoughts on tutoring, diversity, and service-learning. Each program needs to adopt its own design, methods, and tools. Different kinds of diversity present unique opportunities and challenges.

Service-learning principles and methods can, however, be useful in all types of program situations. For more information and materials on service-learning, contact the Learn and Serve America National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at 1-800-808-SERV, serve@tc.umn.edu, or <http://www.umn.edu/~serve>.

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