

Creating Responsible Citizens

By Deb Perryman, Elgin High School Environmental Science Teacher

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If we were to research the mission statements of schools across the Nation, we would find some mention of “creating responsible citizens”. But when do our schools actually provide students with the opportunity to act as citizens? *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) dictates that educators must help students meet or exceed state standards. A worthy goal, as citizens must be educated and motivated to participate in society.

Why not use the time we have in schools to actually show our young people how each state’s learning standards will apply to their lives? Why not allow our students to solve community problems and act as citizens? I have found a teaching strategy that allows me to fold learning standards into community action. This strategy is called Service Learning. To me, Service Learning is the ultimate teaching tool in the constructionist’s tool box. Service Learning allows students to explore issues formulate possible solutions, implement and then evaluate those solutions. In the Service Learning Model the direction of the curriculum and project is the shared responsibility of both the teacher and the student.

The teacher works to tie the exploration into a project that addresses the curriculum via facilitation (i.e. State Standards). For example, picking up litter near a creek on a monthly basis can be related to The Clean Water Act and therefore fits my environmental curriculum. The students are exploring a community issue (i.e. litter and its affect on creeks), while meeting State Learning Standards (i.e. Federal Legislation). My long-term goal as their teacher may be for them to find the source of that litter and perhaps outline a permanent solution to the litter

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problem. As their facilitator, I would encourage them to in fact implement and their solutions and evaluate the outcomes.

Service learning is **not** a stand alone course. it is a teaching strategy that allows you to connect a student to the real world pragmatism of your curriculum. I have grown very tired of the question, “When will I ever use this in the real world?” Service Learning has allowed to me to clearly establish the connection between curriculum and life.

Service learning is **not** community service. Although community service projects are wonderful and do provide positive student outcomes, they are not tied directly to curriculum. Take as an example one of America’s most popular community service project, the canned food drive. Please tell me how placing collection boxes in a central location helps students meet state learning standards? Think for a moment how this community service project can be tweaked into a Service Learning Project.

First, have you ever looked at what is collected? Are the items collected really needed in food banks? Why not have the students’ work with the food bank and research the items most needed. Students could create graphics clearly depicting their research and implement a public outreach campaign to help the community better understand on the issue of hunger. The bottom line is Service Learning is cross curricular and makes a greater impact on our youth!

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Planning a Service Learning Project is as easy as planning a party. You have to think about who, what, where, when and how. Who do you want to be involved? What issue do you want your students working on? Where and when will this project fit into your lesson plans, and the community? How will this fit into your curriculum and how will the project be evaluated? Please remember two additional tidbits.

First, involve students at every stage of the project including planning and evaluation. Secondly, make sure that the students are tackling a legitimate community need. Projects that are token are doomed to fail. Kids know when you are faking, so don't! As you might imagine, the first project is the most difficult. Once you get through one, I dare you to NOT find additional projects.

- Cesar Chavez Foundation www.ChavezServeandlearn.il.gov
- Corporation for National Service/Learn and Serve America www.nylc.org
- National Service Learning Clearing House www.servicelearning.org