

“A Different Kind of Service”

By Deb Perryman, Elgin High School Environmental Science Teacher

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I have had many opportunities to ask people across the nation one very important question; “What do our students need from our schools?” A variety of answers have been given, some of which include understanding, support, an education, the ability to act as a citizen and real world problem solving skills. The one response I have yet to be given, “Our students need to be able to pass a state standardized test!” (Oddly, I have asked several legislators this same question and they never think of standardized tests either.) We understand that the afore mentioned are of great importance but may not necessarily be measurable. Further, if we were to research the mission statements of schools across the Nation, we would find some mention of “creating citizen”.

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 actually 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.

What is Service Learning?

Service learning is a teaching strategy in which students explore an aspect of a community issue. The teacher works to tie the exploration into a project that addresses the curriculum (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 problem.

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Service learning is **not** a stand alone course. It is a teaching strategy that connects students to the real world pragmatism of curriculum. Are you tired of students’ asking you “When will I ever use this in the real world”? Help students make this connection by allowing them to solve those problems facing your community.

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 needed in food banks? Why not have the students’ work with the food bank and find out what is really NEEDED by its patrons. Students could create graphics clearly depicting their research and create a public outreach campaign to help the community get a better handle on the issue of hunger. Students could study why so many families are in need of the food bank. Why not have the students’ write press releases and articles for the local paper explaining the community need? The bottom line is Service Learning is cross curricular and makes a greater impact on our youth!

Why Service Learning?

You only have to look at *The National Training Laboratories*, Learning Pyramid for Average Retention rates to understand the need for incorporating service learning into our schools. According to the Learning Pyramid students retain 5 percent of what you tell them, 10 percent from what they read, 30 percent from audiovisual sources, 30 percent through demonstration, 40 percent from discussion groups, 75 percent from practice by doing and 90 percent by teaching others. I utilize service learning because it emphasizes the last four teaching strategies mentioned in the pyramid. My own experience has shown me that the last statistic “teaching others” is accurate. Think about everything you have learned in your curricular area through out your

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career as a teacher. That marks an incredible learning curve. So why not involve students in teaching?

There are two other dimensions to service learning that are important to explore, reflection and community impact. First, studies have shown that reflection is the key to a well designed project. In fact, many of those studies have gone so far as to say that reflection is the most important component. Think about the skills required to reflect. You must be able to make observations, compare and contrast your experience and relate your experience to past experiences. Reflection allows the student to internalize “what they did”, with what was learned. Since the learning is internalized, it becomes important, practical and defined. Second, students participating in service learning are making real contributions to their school and community. Not only are the students’ developing self-worth, but their community is developing a different perspective of our young people. Once the community has had the opportunity to interact with students’, they can no longer marginalize those young people. They become legitimate members of society, not tax burdens. You will find that the community will become more supportive of you as a teacher and of your school.

How to start a Service Learning Project

So if you are reading this section, I guess I convinced you that service learning is a fabulous and affective teaching strategy. Good, because it is and getting started will be less painful than you think. It is actually as easy as creating an invitation to 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!

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The following is a “who, what, where and how” check list for planning that has been adapted from materials of the Georgia Department of Education.

Who:

- will be responsible for planning and implementing the project?
- will be the primary beneficiary of the service?
- will be the partners in the project (remember, this is key)
- can contribute to the project’s success?

What:

- needs to be accomplished to get this project going and completed?
- academic area will be targeted?
- are the service needs to be met?
- is the timeline for the project?

Where:

- will the project take place?
- will the funds for the project be found?

How:

- will the success of the service be measured?
- will the progress in learning be measured?
- will the news of the project’s success be shared?
- will the project be improved the next time it is done?

Won’t you join me in moving the young people of Illinois to action? Learn more about service learning and how you can implement this very effective teaching strategy this school year.

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State and Federal Resources at your Disposal

Cesar Chavez Foundation and Lieutenant Governor Pat Quinn www.ChavezServeandlearn.il.gov

The Illinois Resource Center www.thecenterweb.org

Illinois Campus Compact www.mccoy.lib.siu.edu/p16/slopops.html

Corporation for National Service/Learn and Serve America www.nylc.org

National Service Learning Clearing House www.servicelearning.org