

4-6-2011

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Recommended Citation

Billig, Shelley H. Ph.D. (2010) "Why Service Learning is Such a Good Idea," *Colleagues*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol5/iss1/6>

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Explanations from the research

Why Service Learning is Such a Good Idea



People who participate in service learning often quickly understand the value of service learning as an activity that makes a difference in others' lives and makes the giver feel good. But why? The research and theories behind service learning illuminate why service learning is such a good idea.

By Shelley H. Billig, Ph.D.

RESearch shows that service learning is a popular innovation in schools, with about 38% of all students in the United States participating in school-based service (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). Anecdotes about the value of service learning abound, and rigorous research is beginning to validate the impacts that many practitioners note (see, for example, Billig, 2001; Billig, 2010; Furco & Root, 2010). The studies collectively show that service learning is a "value-added" proposition, with young people benefitting academically, civically, and personally. But why should this be so? What can the research tell us about why service learning is such a good idea?

This article provides a very brief explanation from two bodies of research that suggest why service learning works. First, the research on student engagement is

presented, revealing what works best to pique student interest and task persistence in any educational endeavor. Next, the research on service itself shows why people enjoy helping others. The match between service learning and the research findings are discussed. While other theories also apply (particularly ones that show how people learn), this discussion of the combination of student engagement and service begins to suggest why service learning should be a key feature of all of our educational institutions.

Student Engagement and Academic Performance

One has only to peek inside of many classrooms today to recognize that many students simply appear disengaged from their academic work. Engagement is defined as active participation in and enjoyment of school work. Studies of engagement show that, according to parents, 39% of females and 20% of males were engaged in school, K-12,

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and that the percentages decline dramatically as students enter high school (Spring, et.al., 2004). Disengagement has been highly associated with poor academic performance, absenteeism, and dropout (Lippman & Rivers, 2008).

On the flip side, student engagement is highly associated with academic performance and closing the achievement gap (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2006); dropout prevention and school attendance (National Research Council, 2004); and reduction of risky behaviors (National Research Council, 2004).

Steinberg (1996) cited research that shows that students who are interested and involved in school score higher on measures of psychological adjustment (e.g., self-esteem, responsibility, and competence in social relationships), and are less likely to use and abuse alcohol and drugs, fall into depression, experiment with sex, and commit criminal or delinquent acts.

Deconstructing the Concept of Engagement

Barth (1999) found that engagement has three dimensions: behavioral, affective, and cognitive. Behavioral engagement is defined as active participation, persistence, concentration, task completion, and positive conduct, and has been documented to be highly associated with learning. Affective engagement refers to the level of interest, “flow,” and enjoyment of learning and is related to the relationships one has with instructors and peers. Affective engagement has also been found to be highly correlated with learning. Cognitive engagement, defined as incorporating the information into one’s knowledge base, seeking out information from other sources, and persistently trying to understand phenomena, going beyond the task, is less well studied, but is supported by research that shows its relationship to curiosity and interest in subject matters.

Student disengagement has been documented as being widespread on each of these dimensions. Several researchers found that students’ interest in challenging subjects declined because of the lack of active learning experiences (Anderson, Pruitt, & Courtney, 1989; Reyes & Laliberty, 1992), and several showed that if students were not given opportunities to experience academic success, they were more likely to become disengaged (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985, 1986; Wagenaar, 1987). Still others found that engagement was related to instructors’ expectations. Simply put, students expected to learn if teachers expected them to learn (Brophy, 1987; Stipek, 1988). Finally, Anderman and Midgley (1998) showed that students’ attitudes about their own abilities and interpretation of success affect their willingness to engage in schoolwork. Extrinsicly motivated students tend to

Billig: Why Service Learning is Such a Good Idea become disengaged more easily than those who are intrinsically motivated.

Increasing Engagement

Researchers have shown that the disengagement epidemic can be stemmed by redesigning the learning environment. For example, Maehr and Midgley (1991) found that instructors increase engagement and student motivation to learn when they:

- Stress goal setting and self-regulation/management;
- Offer students choices in instructional settings;
- Reward students for attaining ‘personal best’ goals;
- Foster teamwork through group learning and problem-solving experiences;
- Replace social comparisons of achievement with self-assessment and evaluation techniques; and
- Teach time management skills and offer self-paced instruction.

Eccles, Midgley, and Adler (1984) showed that motivation to learn increased when students were given greater autonomy and control over their learning. These researchers recommended that schools create environments that stress task involvement rather than ego involvement. Ames (1992); Strong, Silver, & Robinson (1995); and Anderman and Midgley (1998) found that teachers who were most successful in engaging students developed activities that addressed students’ intellectual and psychological needs, including work that gave students a sense of competency and autonomy, encouraged self-expression, and allowed them to develop connections with others.

Other researchers recommended the following strategies to increase student engagement (cited in a review by Brewster and Fager, 2000, p. 7):

- *Ensure course materials relate to students’ lives and highlight ways learning can be applied in real-life situations* (Lumsden, 1994; Skinner & Belmont, 1991);
- *Help students feel that schoolwork is significant, valuable, and worthy of their efforts* (Policy Studies Associates, 1995);
- Allow students to have some degree of control over learning (Brooks, Freiburger, & Grotheer, 1998);
- *Assign challenging but achievable tasks for all students.* Tasks that seem impossible and those that are rote and repetitive discourage learners (Dev, 1997; Policy Studies Associates, 1995);
- *Stimulate students’ curiosity about the topic being studied* (Strong et al., 1995);
- *Design projects that allow students to share new knowledge with others.* Projects are more engaging when students share what they are learning in reciprocal relationships,

as in collaborative projects where each student’s knowledge is needed by others in the group to complete an assignment (Strong et al., 1995); and

- *Develop caring and trust between teachers and students* (Noddings, 2000, p. 36).

The Link to Service learning

How does this all link to service learning? The answer is obvious. Service learning, when done well, has all of the characteristics associated with engaged learning. High quality service learning, defined as service learning aligned with the K-12 standards for high-quality service learning (National Youth Leadership Council, 2009), asks students to engage in setting goals to meet community needs; offers students choices and voice; provides many opportunities for teamwork in the planning and provision of service; engaging in reflection that reduces social comparisons of achievement and increases self-assessment; teaches time management; allows self-paced instruction; rewards students for goal attainment, all of which were cited by Maehr and Midgley (1991) as being highly associated with engagement.

Consistent with other researchers cited previously, service learning gives young people greater autonomy and control over their learning when they select the need to be met and design and deliver the services to meet the need. Students who participate in service learning report that they feel a sense of self-efficacy and competence, and they develop connections with peers and adults outside of school and family (Billig, Jesse, & Grimley, 2008). Eccles and others consider this essential for engagement. Clearly, service learning also relates to students’ lives and helps them to apply their learning to real-life situations, helping them to feel that their work is important and valuable to others.

When done well, service learning also helps students engage in challenging tasks, and they measure their own abilities to impact others and themselves (Billig & Weah, 2008). They typically become more curious about the service learning topics they tackle and engage in interdependent, reciprocal learning. Finally, their work is, by its nature, about caring.

Service learning, then, has nearly all of the characteristics needed to engage students in learning. Even better, once students are engaged in service learning, they most often want to continue to volunteer in the future (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006). The research on the benefits of volunteering illuminates why.

The Benefits of Volunteerism

Simply stated, volunteerism accrues considerable benefits for most of its participants, young and old alike. The Corporation for National and Community Service (2006), for example, found that students that participated in high quality service

learning reported that they thought they could make a great deal of difference in their communities, took a greater interest in current events, and talked more frequently with others about politics than their nonparticipating peers. High school studies showed that young people that engaged in high quality service learning felt good about giving back, making a difference, and seeing their place in the wider social world (Root & Billig, 2008).

Benefits accrue with continuing service. Thoits and Hewitt (as cited in Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007), for example, conducted a longitudinal survey of adults and found that those who volunteered reported higher levels of happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, and physical health than those that did not volunteer. Further, several other longitudinal studies (see Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999, Rogers, 1996, and Sabin, 1993, as cited in Grimm et al., 2007) showed that individuals who volunteered had lower mortality rates than those that did not, even when factors such as physical health, age, and socioeconomic status were taken into account. While these researchers also found that a certain “volunteering threshold” (variously defined as 40 to 100 volunteer hours per year) must be reached to derive such benefits (Lum & Lightfoot, 2005, and Luoh & Herzog, 2002 as cited in Grimm et al., 2007), the conclusion is inescapable. Volunteerism is good for you.

Conclusion

The research seems pretty clear that service learning is a good idea. Service learning has the characteristics of effective teaching and learning approaches for student engagement, and leads to lifelong benefits. No wonder service learning works and is good for you. Shouldn't it be offered to every student? 🍌

About the Author

Dr. Shelley H. Billig is Vice President at RMC Research Corporation. She has extensive experience both as a researcher and professional development provider in service learning, and recently facilitated the project that led to the formation of the new K-12 standards and indicators for service learning quality. She is currently Principal Investigator for a national study of the impacts of service learning on high school students. She has authored or coedited over 15 books and dozens of articles on educational innovations.

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