4-6-2011

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Recommended Citation

Petroelje Stolle, Elizabeth (2010) "Keep On Keeping On: What Can Happen Through University/School Partnerships," *Colleagues*:
Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/colleagues/vol5/iss1/9

READING

Keep On Keeping On:

By Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle

What Can Happen Through
University/School Partnerships

Illustration by Lisa R. Tennant

Paola began weaving in and out of the six straight rows of desks handing out "special fruit." As an undergraduate reading intern in this classroom, she was responsible for captivating the students' interest about the book *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Wolff (1993). So, she looked out on the sea of inquisitive faces, boys and girls looking skeptical about this "special fruit," and began to reveal her Brazilian heritage, weaving Portuguese into her monologue. She then explained that her grandmother sent her this "special fruit" from Brazil called *Maracuja*. With gusto, Paola encouraged the students to taste this delightful, traditional Brazilian delicacy. The students tentatively placed the juicy, yellow, citrus-looking wedge onto their tongues. Faces crinkled and distorted as they discovered this "special fruit," *Maracuja*, was actually a lemon. After the initial shock, Paola asked them to discuss the taste. Students suggested it was sour, strong, hard to like, and unappealing. Paola then made the analogy that she was "life," giving them sour lemons. But, they could now "make lemonade" with the situation just like the book suggests. After giving the students a brief summary, she ended by handing out lemonade. The students' faces brightened as they washed the sour taste from their mouths with the sweet drink.

Paola's book talk is just one example of many creative experiences which occurred in this ninth grade reading classroom. I embarked on this journey as a new graduate student over 7 years ago. My advisor asked me to supervise a service learning project, taking undergraduates interested in education into a high school classroom to work with struggling readers. As a former eighth grade Language Arts and Social Science teacher I was excited to work with high school students, establishing a reading community in this English/Reading classroom. However, I envisioned my former classroom and my former students, leaning on my prior knowledge of creating reading communities. Working in another teacher's classroom pushed me to think outside the box and find alternative ways of creating this reading community. No longer could I just lean on my own personal experiences, doing it "my" way.

My hope is that through the telling of this project's *story*—warts and all—I might inspire K-12 schools and colleges to collaborate in their own areas and start similar programs which will benefit all participants involved.

Finding our way

In this project, undergraduate interns met with high school students one period a day twice a week in their reading classroom. They facilitated book group discussions and served as reading mentors to the high school students. However, initially, in the first month of the project, all involved struggled to find this purpose. We knew we wanted to create a reading community among the interns and the high school students, but what does it mean to create a reading community? We knew we

wanted the interns to serve as reading mentors, but how? How could we best help these students grow as readers? These questions raced through our minds as the high school teacher, my university supervisor, and I met frequently to discuss various scenarios and options. As we tried different ideas such as Silent Sustained Reading, Journal Writing, and Strategy Modeling, I constantly discussed successes and challenges with the interns while encouraging them to brainstorm new and innovative ways to connect with the students. The high school students also assisted us in this process, articulating through surveys and informal interviews what they thought of the program. Their candid thoughts provided an authentic gauge for the project. We centered the students' experiences around thought-provoking texts and discussions about these texts. Due to our

> "To date, four e-learning programs have been engineered to prepare teachers to understand and use the Concept Mastery Routine, the Concept Comparison Routine, the Concept Anchoring Routine, and the Question Exploration Routine. Strategic Tutoring is an instructional approach that teachers use while engaging in tutoring sessions with students "

collaborative efforts, the high school teachers believed in the project and released control of one class period twice a week to the interns and me.

As facilitators, the interns focused on meeting the various needs of the high school students as individual readers and meaning-makers. Therefore, we combined and adapted different methods of book discussion groups (Daniels, 1994; Peterson and Eeds, 1990; Smith 1993; Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996; Brabham and Vilaume, 2000; Okura DaLie, 2001; Tunkle, Anderson, and Evans, 1999). As the interns and I observed and listened to the students, we adapted our practice, trying to find a method that met the needs of each group. Therefore strategies varied from group to group and sometimes altered as the group progressed. The one thing we always tried to keep as a constant was a space for talk. In fact, many of the students informed us that their teachers never provided opportunities to talk about texts within the classroom. Instead, teachers tended to talk to students about the text. Therefore, creating space for students to talk

about what was meaningful to them in the texts was a new concept for these students and became our number one priority. We wanted students to engage in grand conversations around texts (Peterson & Eeds, 1990).

As English majors applying to the College of Education, the interns enthusiastically worked with the high school students. However, because they lacked experiences and a theoretical grounding for their practice, the English Education professors and I supported their learning and development. The interns co-enrolled in the *Adolescent Literature* class where the professors taught the "how to" of literature circles, book talks, and analyzing young adult novels. I also met with the interns for thirty minutes after each session for instruction, planning, and reflection. The two comprehension theories I emphasized were schematic theory, or activating prior knowledge and building background knowledge, (Anderson, 1984) and metacognitive theory, thinking about one's thinking, organizing information, discussion, reflection, etc. (Erickson et al., 1985; Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). I hoped that the interns would understand the theory, and that the theory would inform their practice (i.e. help them frame questions and plan activities). Additionally, we discussed active learning and four specific reading strategies: connecting; questioning; predicting; and visualizing (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). Again, the interns used these reading strategies to frame their interactions within the discussions.

Facilitating the literature circles was tangible for the interns, something they could see and do—it required action. They worked hard to develop the needed skills, and took their role seriously. Together we brainstormed with the classroom teacher to find ways of engaging the students in the learning process and encouraging them as readers.

However, serving as reading mentors was more abstract, and this role emerged as the project evolved. When discussing books with the students, the interns demonstrated how a reader looks at the various literary elements of a book to find greater meaning by using literary terminology as they talked about what they found meaningful in the text. Students actively observed proficient readers asking questions of the author, making predictions, highlighting symbolism, and visualizing to understand the text. Observing this, we saw the high school students mirror these reading strategies as they questioned the text, contemplated character motive, and uncovered irony and symbolism. The demonstrations, along with the freedom to discuss what was on the students' minds while reading, allowed the high school students to experience books in a new way. For the first time, some of the students saw enjoyment and meaning in a reading and a true relevance to their own lives.

For example, one student, became so excited about the book he was reading, *That Was Then,*

This Is Now by S.E. Hinton (1971) he stayed up extra late the night before to finish the book because he "just couldn't put it down." He could not wait even for class to start before he began asking his intern all the questions he formulated while reading. The intern felt pleasantly overwhelmed as the discussion group bubbled with conversation that day, spurred by the student's excitement.

Students & Reading Growth

Another student, a curly haired boy, loped into the classroom just as the bell signaled the beginning of class. The other students knowingly assembled into their literature study groups, organizing desks into inclusive circles. However, the late arrival just pulled up a chair behind another student, not fully entering his assigned group. Plopping himself into the desk, he opened his text and made no comment as the group began discussing the book Monster (1999) by Walter Dean Myer, a story about an African American boy, Steve, accused of participating in a crime. The book is partially written in the form of a screenplay.

The intern nervously tucked his blond hair behind his ear, looking around at the group of students. Noticing the student separated from the group, he smiled, attempting to encourage membership in the group. The student responded with a faint smile, just barely turning up the left-side of his mouth.

Intern: Does anyone have any questions to start today?

Student 1: What does the bold text mean? Why is the writing all different?

Student 2: The lighter text is the speaking. The bold is what the camera is doing.

Student 1: It's a script for a movie?

Intern: They're diary entries like a movie.

Outlier Student: Is the character writing it? Is it an actual movie? It would be cool if they did make this into a movie.

Student 2: Steve, the main character, is writing it while he's in jail.

Student 3: Yeah, he explains it well. You can see it. Sounds like it's true.

Student 1: I feel sorry for him (Steve). I can see it, like watching a movie. You know, like the producers focuses on one character and then cut to another person to see their point of view.

Outlier Student: Is that one guy who's only 14 in jail or just in court?

Student 3: I was reading that and went back to reread. I didn't think a 14 year old could be in jail with older people.

Intern: It depends on the crime.

Conversations similar to this peppered the room on any given Tuesday or Thursday as students engaged in texts, trying to construct meaning and make connections. This particular conversation echoed in my ears as I observed students collaboratively working through a book while using the newly learned reading strategies to assist in comprehension. This scene also is cemented in my mind because I watched an intern draw a marginalized student (both figuratively and literally) into the conversation. The outlier student entered the room ready to "tune out" for the period, but the intern encouraged his participation, validating his questions and participation. As the outlier student watched other students ask questions and propose their ideas, he felt safe to ask his own questions and posit his own ideas.

The classroom teacher also observed the students' growth as readers. He believed, "The most important benefits were increased knowledge and ability in reading." But, he also felt that having the interns as reading mentors "helped the students realize there are more than simply their teachers who care about their future." This feeling of support impacted students – motivating them to read and explore their own thoughts about texts and the world.

However, growth also surfaced in the students' scores on the Criterion Reference Test (CRT) (See Table 1: Criterion References Test (CRT) Scores). During the second year of the project, the freshmen students involved in this university project averaged a 25% growth rate in their reading ability. The teacher quoted, "This is unheard of!" His other reading class, who didn't participate in the project, saw their test scores improve 17% while the school at large only increased 13%. This is significant, marking a quantifiable benefit of the program.

Table 1: Criterion Reference Test (CRT) Scores			
	Service learning reading/ English class	Non service learning reading/ English class	Regular English class
% of growth in reading ability on CAT	25%	17%	13%

Additionally, an estimated 75% of the students in the two reading/English blocks moved onto regular English in their sophomore year, no longer needing a remedial reading class.

The interns also noted student growth and improvement. One intern articulated that, "I believe the students DID improve. My first group seemed annoyed and bored with reading because they didn't really do it. As the semester progressed, however, students seemed to become increasingly engaged."

Through reflection, the students noticed their own growth as well. One student, said, "I can understand what goes on in books better." Another explained, "I see myself improving because I understand more than I did before and I'm into reading a lot more. I get more interested in books."

Interns & Growth

Through this collaborative project, the undergraduate interns gained concrete experiences. They learned valuable reading strategies, tried out various formats of literature circles, explored relevant young adult novels, and saw theory in practice.

But the interns noted they valued the relationships the most—both with the students and the other interns. Because of the trust developed between the interns and the students, the students could openly discuss their opinions without fear of chastisement. This relationship also motivated student learning and engagement because the students didn't want to let the interns down by not reading or doing their homework. When college-age individuals take time out of their day to spend time with high school freshmen, students feel important and want the interns to be proud of their accomplishments.

However, the friendships developed among the interns also proved meaningful and helpful. John noted that he "loved the camaraderie among the interns." Paige expressed, "I loved working with the other interns. I really relied on their opinions and their input." My hope is that the interns remember the value and importance of collaboration as they progress in the profession.

What now?

I am no longer involved in this project; I passed the torch to another vibrant graduate student who continued this great collaboration. I trust this project will continue for years to come, and I hope more projects like this can begin across the country and the globe which bring together multiple ages to dialogue over books. Through these projects, mentoring relationships will help improve reading comprehension and encourage positive attitudes toward reading for high school students. Additionally, projects like this can provide incredible hands-on learning experiences for pre-service teachers.

In the words of one high school student, "I love what you guys are doing. Keep on keeping on." So, that's the message, students and interns find success in this service learning project. Won't you join us in the adventure?

Follow Elizabeth's blog on reading at *www.colleaguesplus.com/stolle*

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Service Learning:
Linking Service and Academics in Urban Schools

By Christina R. McElwee, M.Ed.

The involvement of students in community service is not a new concept. How often have the students in your community schools been involved in food drives, picking up trash on the playground, or tutoring younger students? Why then do educational reformists act as if the shift from community service or mandatory volunteer hours is a new journey; a journey referred to as service learning.

Service learning is defined as a "...method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, that are integrated into the students' academic curriculum...by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community." (Furco, 1996, p. 1) When implemented effectively, service learning can combine challenging curricular standards with authentic experiences. As an educator, it is often difficult to keep students interested and motivated in the academic rigor of daily assignments, writing compositions, history projects, etc. However, when students deal with real life issues in relation to their core curriculum, they become more engaged and are able to recognize the purpose of their learning.

However, with the onslaught of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the significant pressure for schools to describe their success based on student performance on standardized tests, is service learning a viable option for schools, especially urban schools? Urban schools often struggle to meet state and federal requirements. These schools must choose use methods that result in improved learning, retention of content, and an increase in standardized test scores (Soslau & Yost, 2007). Service learning is one of these methods.

Numerous studies have been conducted demonstrating the impact of service learning on student learning and motivation in inner city schools (Cohen & Kinsey, 1994, Kielsmeier, 2003, Moore & Sandholtz, 1999, Soslau & Yost, 2007). The results show that students who participate in service learning are more likely to make real-world connections. They are able to see the correlation between their academic goals and what they are experiencing in their community. But this is not the only benefit. Research also shows that students who participated in service learning made greater academic gains in reading and math. The results also show an increase in attendance and a decrease in the amount of students being suspended (Soslau &

Yost, 2007). From this we can make the assumption that students were more motivated to come to school because they see the purpose and relevance in the learning that was talking place.

In preparing for service learning projects, teachers and administrators work to identify community needs, align curriculum with community issues and determine resources (Glickman & Thompson, 2009). These resources come in the form of parental involvement, community members, businesses, agencies, and organizations. Student involvement begins with students understanding their community's needs and choosing an issue to address. Students then work to outline a problem and to determine steps toward a solution. By giving the students involvement from the beginning, the opportunity to make choices, and to play a role in determining the project steps, they become more personally invested in the service learning project. Throughout the service learning projects, students process their experiences and their learning through reflection. Through these reflections, students, "…identify ways to make positive contributions to the community, determine the impact of their contributions, and consider their roles as citizens of the community" (Glickman &Thompson, 2009, p. 11). Students are also allowed the opportunity to celebrate their service learning including recognition of participants, assessment of student learning, and evaluation of the projects (Glickman & Thompson, 2009). This process allows the students to seek feedback from service recipients and allows teachers to determine the instructional implications of the project.

Service learning projects provide the real-life contextual experiences that are not available within standard curriculum materials. Service learning activities help students make a connection between the curriculum and their lives, but how do urban schools integrated this authenticity into their curriculum?

As an educator at an urban school I have seen numerous examples of service learning. Older students have partnered with younger students for reading and literacy activities. The older students then reflect on their experience serving as literacy leaders. Through analysis of the reflection I have discovered that projects like this helped students to feel more responsible. They felt involved and invested in the younger students' learning. Second grade students have become partners with residents at nursing homes. They have created cards, volun-