


8-2007

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Recommended Citation

Romey, E. A. (2007). A Decision to Serve: Decision Making Through Service Learning. *Perspectives In Learning*, 8 (2). Retrieved from <http://csuepress.columbusstate.edu/pil/vol8/iss2/3>

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A Decision to Serve: Decision Making Through Service Learning

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Abstract

The use of service learning and community service with students at all levels of ability is becoming increasingly prevalent, especially with gifted students, because of their need to prepare for college applications. These applications often require a range of activities including community service as well as straight academic success. However, the distinction between community service, a reactive activity, and service learning, a proactive process in which students take leadership roles in their community, is not always emphasized. The role of structured decision-making processes, like those in Talents Unlimited and Future Problem Solving, to enable gifted students to take proactive leadership roles in service-learning experiences, along with the benefits of these programs for both gifted and non-gifted students, is the focus of this paper.

Service learning, often used synonymously with community service, is one of the current trends in education circles. Certainly, encouraging students at all ability levels to be active members of their communities is a laudable goal. However, the conflation of community service, in which students take part in pre-existing programs and work under the direction of others, with service-learning, in which students take active roles in creating and directing programs to serve their communities, lessens the value of service learning as a concept (Richardson, 2005). Additionally, as its name suggests, service-learning is intrinsically related to the development of academic abilities (Lee, 2007).

One central distinction between service learning and community service is the role of the decision-making process in service learning, because students are required to take proactive leadership roles in the service process rather than accepting tasks which have been predetermined by a sponsoring agency. Students in service-learning are required to determine problems of importance to them and their communities, work out methods of solving those problems, and carry out their plans in a way that garners the support of their community.

This is a far cry both from an abstract academic approach to learning and from a passive participatory, but not leadership, role in service (Levin, 2006). In other words, students engaged in service learning need to develop decision-making skills to enable them not only to identify relevant problems in their communities but also to solve those problems.

While decision-making skills may serve as a means to the end of successful service learning experiences, the reverse is also true and significant: the use of decision-making skills in service learning can help to foster students' ability to make reasoned decisions based on evidence, a skill that is vital given the current makeup of Western society. The current cultures in the Western world for the most part follow Mead's (1970) model of a prefigurative culture in which the life experiences of young people cannot be expected to follow the same pattern as that experienced by their parents. Given advances in technology and medicine, and their relationship to changes in social mores and expectations, it is no longer reasonable to assume that we as teachers can expect to teach students the challenges they will face as adults. Instead, the solution to the problem of preparing students for

future challenges that cannot be anticipated lies in teaching them how to attack novel challenges and situations--- providing them with process, rather than content; teaching them how to think, not what to think.

These last words are the motto of the International Future Problem Solving Program (FPS), a model developed by Torrance (1974) and based on his research into creativity. Specifically, Torrance found that gifted and creative students, more so than average students, were likely not only to think about the future but to be concerned about the problems they might face in the world, both at present and as adults. The six-step FPS process was designed by Torrance as a means of providing these highly sensitive young people with the tools to tackle problems they might face in the future, even if the problems themselves came as a surprise.

Although the FPS process was initially designed to focus on futuristic and speculative problems, the six-step process can also be applied to present-day problems. The Community Problem Solving (CmPS) component of FPS (Future Problem Solving Program, n.d.) provides a structured support system for using the six-step process to tackle present-day, student-defined problems in students' communities--- the very definition of service-learning. During the CmPS process, students find challenges in their community, select the underlying problem they want to solve, come up with possible solutions to it, rate them according to self-generated criteria and develop a plan of action. The difference between CmPS and FPS, however, is that in CmPS, students are actually responsible for carrying out their plan of action. Thus provides students with practical experience in the development of projects which they can actually carry out while, at the same time, providing them with a structured model for problem-solving that allows them to achieve more than they might have imagined.

The FPS process has six steps. After researching predetermined topics, students receive a future scene based on the topic. They then have two hours to identify 16 challenges from the future scene; determine an underlying problem; develop

16 solutions to their underlying problem; generate relevant criteria by which to judge their solutions; rate their solutions using their criteria; and develop an action plan based on their best solution (Future Problem Solving Program, n.d.).

While most discussions of service learning and community service focus on the ways that students benefit the community, the importance of service learning in meeting students' own affective needs, especially those of gifted students, should not be overlooked. The Houndstooth Model (Renzulli, 2002) specifically expands the conception of giftedness to include the ways in which students develop concern for the welfare of their communities and others within their communities. More generally, gifted students have a number of unique affective needs as identified via research, including emotional intensities or "overexcitabilities" (Piechowski, 2006), developmental synchrony (Silverman, 1993), and perfectionism (Silverman). Specific areas related to service learning include a concern with justice and fairness (Sword, 2001); worry about the future, as discussed relative to FPS above (Torrance, 1974); and an increased need for respect.

The need for respect felt by gifted students is one area in particular where research has shown that service learning can be especially valuable. Romey (2000) found that in a group of gifted and non-gifted students who did and did not participate in service activities, all students participating in service activities reported higher self-esteem than those who did not. However, non-gifted students who participated in service activities reported positive feelings associated with being glad to help others, while gifted students who participated in service activities reported an enhanced feeling of respect from the larger community--- not only other students, but adults in their community with whom they collaborated on their service-learning projects. The sense of respect that students received from their community as a result of participation in service learning has been found by other researchers, such as Wade (2007): "students' participation in the life of the community led to changes in how community members viewed

youth... almost every project has addressed the same need in communities across America--to close the divide between old and young, and simply to build a more cohesive and supportive community" (pp. 68-9).

This sense of respect echoes Maslow's (1943) classic hierarchy of needs, which posits that individuals first seek to meet basic needs for food and shelter, then for safety and security, then for love and belongingness, followed by respect, and culminating in self-actualization. According to Maslow's model, the gifted students doing service in Romey's (2000) research showed a higher level of development than the non-gifted students doing service.

Service learning also meets the social and emotional needs of gifted students identified by Buescher (as cited in Cross, 1994): ownership of ability, dissonance between ideal results and actual performance, fear of risk-taking, tension between others' expectations and personal goals, impatience with lack of progress, and identity as an individual. Service learning meets students' ownership needs by allowing them to self-select important problems and prove themselves capable of solving them. By the same token, the dissonance between ideal results and actual outcome is mitigated by the fact that, by tackling a problem that adults in their community failed to solve, they have succeeded where others have failed. This also addresses issues of risk-taking, since students enter the process knowing that adults in their communities have not been able to resolve the service-related challenges the students are tackling. Likewise, because students develop their own service-learning projects and set goals for themselves, the issue of others' expectations is reduced, and students likewise enjoy the experience of exceeding adult expectations (Romey, 2000). Students also have the opportunity to learn patience as they work through the process of bringing about change in their communities. By the same token, the very fact of taking a proactive role on a problem they perceive can lessen the sense of frustration they feel with delays. Finally, in terms of meeting identity needs, participation in service learning gives gifted students an opportunity to claim an

identity in the wider community, beyond their schools (Romey, 2000), and to appreciate the roles that others can play in reaching common goals.

Another area in which the connection between service-learning and systematized decision-making processes can specifically be used to meet the needs of gifted students involves their concern with justice and fairness. The FPS decision-making process provides a tool for fair assessment of available options based on relevant criteria; especially in a group setting, this allows gifted students to feel that a solution to a problem has not been selected unfairly or arbitrarily.

Another, similar model is the Talents Unlimited decision-making talent. The Talents model was developed by Taylor (1986) and Schlichter (1986) and focuses on 5 "talents": productive thinking, planning, decision-making, communication, and forecasting. While all of these have applications to service-learning and social and emotional needs as well as academic and cognitive needs of gifted students, the decision-making talent in particular provides an excellent comparison with the FPS model of criteria-finding. While both models center on the importance of criteria-finding, each uses their criteria in different ways. The FPS model uses a ranking system of 1-10, so that solutions are rated from best to worst; the Talents model, on the other hand, allows for multiple options to receive the same score.

The importance of criteria-finding in the decision-making process, and in the development of gifted students' leadership abilities and judgment, should not be underestimated. Through the process of learning to develop criteria that are specific to a given topic or situation and to use those criteria to find a best solution to a problem, students learn that different criteria apply to different issues. In other words, they learn how to take core values and ideals and bring them into play in ways that are specific to specific problems, rather than applying the same standards to situations that may be very different. This is a vital life skill, especially when considering that today's students, as members of a prefigurative culture (Mead, 1970), are likely to face unprecedented situations where a rigid application

of pre-determined or pre-existing rules and standards may fail to address adequately the scope of the problem, or may overlook some significant aspect. In other words, criteria-finding has the potential to teach students to meet the world on its terms, although more research is needed into the specific effects of the criteria-finding process on students' psychosocial development.

In conclusion, the combination of service learning with organized systems of creative decision-making has the potential to have many valuable applications for meeting the needs of gifted students in the areas of leadership and affective development. The CmPS component of the FPS model provides a sterling example of a program which combines proactive, leadership-oriented service learning with a structured yet open-ended process for decision-making. (Romey, 2000) indicates that such a leadership-oriented process can have distinct psychosocial benefits for gifted students, particularly in the area of meeting their needs for respect. Additionally, the concept of criteria-finding as a means of helping students learn to address problems in a way that is relevant to a specific situation shows promise, although research is needed in this area.

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