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Service Learning in the Social Studies

Shaun Conway
Lake Park High School

Reforming education must start at a grass roots level where teachers and educators take ownership and lead the charge in revising and revamping a tired and out of touch system. Schools are no longer attempting to reform their curriculum by offering unique and progressive opportunities, but are rather trying to fine-tune classes and skills that prepare students with additional test-taking capabilities. This general movement toward test taking has eliminated many avenues for students to pursue unique opportunities with independent learning growth and critical thinking development. As a byproduct of this shift, many students today believe a four-year college to be their only path to success, so educators must break down barriers of misunderstanding that students harbor regarding one avenue for college after high school. Students need to be prepared to succeed at any level of education in the post-secondary environment, including two-year and four-year colleges, trade and vocational schools, branches of the military, apprenticeships, and entering the work force. Success at these next levels must include development of specific skill sets that include independence, respect, communication, learning adaptability, and critical thinking skills. Reforming this type of thinking and mind set is essential to student growth and success.

These educational trends directly cause the limited application of diverse curriculum. According to Gregory Marchant, “research reportedly yields two findings, teachers tend to narrow the scope of their curriculum to which is tested, and they tend to abandon more innovative teaching strategies, such as cooperative learning and creative projects, in favor of more traditional lecture and recitation.”¹ Providing students with a well-rounded education is the only means through which to develop critical thinkers who are capable of independent problem solving and enhanced communication skills that are necessary to succeed in the professional world. John R. Savery states that the high-stakes testing focus limits forms of learning:

High-stakes standardized testing tends to support instructional approaches that teach to the test. These approaches focus primarily on memorization through drill and practice, and rehearsal using practice tests. The instructional day is divided into specific blocks of time and organized around subjects. There is not much room in this structure for teachers or students to immerse themselves in an engaging problem.²

¹ Gregory J. Marchant, “What is at Stake with High Stakes Testing? A Discussion of Issues and Research,” *Ohio Journal of Science* 104 (2004): 4.

² John R. Savery, “Overview of Problem-based Learning: Definitions and Distinctions,” *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-based Learning* 1 (2006): 18.



In spite of this limited educational platform, one mandatory addition to all schools should be a course dedicated to service learning, with a particular focus on public service. Public service courses allow students to engage in meaningful learning experiences on a daily basis, a benefit that is rarely offered to k-12 students. Service learning is the action of performing different forms of community service, including public service, but then combining those experiences with important and meaningful academic components, including reflection, course work, discussion, and in-depth research. Service learning courses should focus on the integration of more public service based programs (education, health care, social services, public library, park district, etc.) because the hope is to inspire students to return to their native communities following their post-secondary training and give back to their community. Inspiring students in this manner will ideally lead to a cyclical framework for endless support to various public service programs. For the last two years, I have taught a course called *Service in Action* (SIA) at Lake Park High School in Roselle, Illinois. SIA was modeled after a similar course, Public Service Practicum (PSP), which was taught at Elk Grove High School in Elk Grove Village, Illinois, for over thirty years. Lake Park High School draws from populations that have some similarities to other West and Northwest Chicago suburbs. Students are represented by the following demographics in 2012: 2,825 students, 69% Caucasian, 6.6% African American, 14.4% Hispanic, 8.5% Asian, .6% American Indian, .9% multiracial, 15.4% low income, 69.6% all subjects meets and exceeds.³

SIA is a unique service learning course that offers students a progressive learning opportunity to explore and develop skill sets while making a positive change around the community. Students in SIA are encouraged to be positive agents of change in their community and lead by example through consistent immersion in real life issues and scenarios. In order to effectively offer students diverse opportunities, students are given the privilege of traveling to service opportunities during the school day in their own vehicles. From the very beginning, SIA was created in the hopes that students would experience public service opportunities during their years in high school, so that upon completion from a post-secondary opportunity, students would return to their community to provide assistance, a form of citizen responsibility and reinvestment. Citizen responsibility and reinvestment is the action of giving back to specific community organization and public service entities from which a person once drew benefits, so as to make the organizations stronger and more successful for future beneficiaries. Service In Action embodies this idea through the organizations with which we currently partner. Current community connections include: Roselle Park District, Marklund, Yellow Ribbon Support Group, Feed My Starving Children, DuPage County Forest Preserve, Itasca Nature Center, multiple guest speakers, and charitable organizations and non-profits. All of these partnerships and experiences have a supplemental academic unit and topic that accompanies the general time frame in which these partnerships are explored.

The Service In Action course curriculum draws from set topical units on issues such as poverty/hunger, ethical decision making, positive body image, inter-generational awareness,

³ <http://iirc.niu.edu/School.aspx?schoolId=190221080160001>



environmental issues, post-secondary options, issues in education, and several others. The aforementioned topics are several examples of units that are implemented for very specific purposes. All of the units have a real life application to the world, something that is noticeably lacking in some public school curricula. By providing students with contemporary and current event based topics, students are able to draw upon recent events for motivation, activate prior knowledge, as well as analyze current issues that can be used for service projects. Additionally, each unit topic allows for freedom of exploration, creativity, as well as a chance to collectively assess the issue, coordinate a plan to address the topic, and evaluate progress. Unit topics are generally applicable to all high schools (with few exceptions) with varying levels of practicality depending on the population demographics. As an instructor of the course, the ability to connect the unit topic to immediate local situations is essential for student buy-in and commitment. When students begin the unit on poverty/hunger for example, one of the first conversations begins with how 15.4% of our students are classified as low income; this statistic can be used as a connection to the reality that at least some of those students are food insecure. Moreover, these set topical units are appealing to students, but also offer them the ability to craft the unit to personal areas of interest. Ultimately, unit topics are flexible as long as students are interested, the topics have a local connection, and there is room for the students to impact the direction and avenue of study and project implementation.

While most units are already established, students are frequently encouraged to suggest and brainstorm topics of their own. If their idea is relevant and has educational merit, SIA's flexibility allows for that unit to be inserted and crafted into the curriculum. The ability to engage students in the process of directing a curricular focus is something students have rarely, if ever, had the opportunity to engage in. Yet the visible difference in engagement and passion is noticeable through many qualitative observations, as well as through frequency and distribution of student participation in discussion, activities, and projects. All students participate because all students are given and encouraged to participate in the decision-making processes. Student designed curriculum not only gives students the incentive to put forth increased effort in the classroom and outside the classroom, but it molds perfectly into the pre-designed curriculum and standards of the SIA curriculum. The response thus far, in two years with over 140 students, has been immensely positive. Almost always, students are too ambitious in their goals, plans, and purposes for the semester. During the initial brainstorm and planning sessions, the ideas that come forth during the classroom segments are a rush of creative and innovative concepts that students believe to be immensely important to society and their age groups. Ideas that students share always positively surprise me, due to their unique perspective, but more so because of the obvious genuine desire to assist others. When enacting their ideas, a careful evaluation must occur of how ideas and projects can be executed. SIA must utilize community resources and established non-profits due to the lack of time. The students need to experience elements of public service that we as a class do not have the time or resources to establish ourselves, so the natural infrastructure of non-profit organizations allows students the diverse experiences of many types of opportunities. But in addition to those experiences, students generally want to work in more ambitious areas. Some of the more innovative (and sometimes controversial) ideas have included establishing an anti-



bullying campaign in and around the school, combating heroin use amongst suburban teen populations, working with victims of domestic violence, hosting a complete carnival/fun fair for the entire school community (all or parts of Roselle, Itasca, Bloomingdale, Medinah, Wood Dale, Hanover Park, and Keeneyville). While some of these have come to fruition, others have not, but the most important takeaway from this is that students are given the opportunity to share and explore their ideas. Many barriers get in the way of accomplishing some goals, whether it be school concern for controversy, practicality within the time frame offered, financial resources necessary, lack of class reputation around the community, or doubts about the capabilities of juniors and seniors in high school. There will always be blocks to student suggestions in any school setting, but their ideas must be encouraged, fostered, and honed for the future. For example, one former SIA student is in the midst of establishing her own non-profit to provide recycled school supplies to a small village in Africa. Her experiences thus far have included two meetings with a lawyer who specializes in 501(c)3 work, as well as Skype conversations with the person who is the equivalent of the principal at the school she hopes to give the supplies to.

Student choice is something that can be accomplished seamlessly, as long as the curriculum is designed in such a way that regardless of particulars, the pre-determined goals and objectives are being met, while fulfilling state mandates. For example, consider the ISBE Social Studies Learning Standard 18.A.5: compare ways in which social systems are affected by political, environment, economic and technological changes. This standard can be fulfilled in many different sub-groups of people, yet as long as the structure is implemented, students can determine the direction. As long as the instructor creates and designs the curriculum correctly, specific standards can be fulfilled the same way they are in sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, local history, business courses, child development, and many others. Currently, social studies classes in Illinois are substantiated from a combination of endorsed standard sets (CCR, ISBE, etc.), but will quickly be moving toward the Common Core standards. SIA fulfills these standard sets more fully than other courses, due to the diversity of learning experiences and the unique opportunities, but also the application of activities in real life scenarios. Standards have already begun the process of shifting toward the college and career focus; SIA is the best possible learning ground to fulfill and complement these standards. Additionally, SIA is able to focus on the state-endorsed Social Emotional Learning Standards, which students must experience for their personal development, maturation, and critical thinking advancement. Utilizing some pre-set topical units allows instructors to confidently operate under the reality that all state mandates and standards are being fulfilled, but they are being fulfilled in a way that give the students the freedom to determine what path is taken to fulfillment.

Throughout the semester, units are inserted into appropriate times in the semester depending on the availability of service opportunities, awareness of topics that align with a particular day or month in the year, and student interest. Student ownership is an essential component of SIA because students tend to make the most of their opportunities when they are given an opportunity to have a role in determining the content direction of the course. A common theme running through the class is the emphasis placed on “no limitations.” Students are



frequently reminded they are capable of anything, and should continuously push the envelope with purposeful change. Due to the lack of independence that is offered to students in modern American education, reminding them often that they are in fact capable of anything acts as both motivation and reality check. I would argue all students regardless of age, maturity level, or learning capabilities should be offered this type of positive motivational challenge to both encourage them to set ambitious goals, but more so to provide a reality where few boundaries exist in the realm of helping others. Reforming education must include some level of altering student perception of education, and what more effective way to accomplish this than by actually changing their perception of their capabilities and abilities. Input and feedback flowing from the student population is essential to the course's success, although the lack of structured sequence also tends to be one of the larger points of contention among administrators and potential teachers. Not having a set order of units mandates that the teacher have confidence and the ability to adapt when needed, yet this format allows for maximum learning outcomes. In addition to topical units, students plan and execute a capstone event to financially benefit a student-chosen charity or foundation. The event planning process fulfills many of the desired student outcomes. Guiding the principles of SIA, however, are a very specific set of outcomes, goals, and objectives that are pre-determined and every semester's students work toward fulfilling.

Immediately upon course enrollment, students are made fully aware of the expected semester outcomes. Taking SIA is not for the faint of heart and all students must be willing to dedicate a portion of their time and be willing to be put forth the effort to ensure success in all outcomes. Without this commitment, students will not have a beneficial experience and, in addition, may negatively impact the ceiling of the class's potential.

Course Curriculum

SIA is divided into four broad components that generally split up the semester. Each element is a part of the larger experience of service learning, and together they provide outlets for personal growth and freedom to implement positive change. The course itself utilizes versatility as its strongest asset, currently acting as an elective in the social studies curriculum. But the course has the ability to point to an entirely new way of teaching social studies, with the idea that at the heart of all "social studies" is the idea that the study of human interaction within the multiple social sciences will provide people with the capacity and competence to be an effective citizen. SIA's core pillars and ideas can be integrated into all of the social sciences, and arguably will make the study of such topics more effective for capacity and training in future stages of education. In summary, SIA teaches students about the social studies because it allows them to interact with the content itself; the core of the class educates students on real life application of public service. This experiential framework can be molded to fit any "content" based class, as long as instructors are creative and willing to embrace the concept.



Introduction to Semester

Single semester classes are challenging to teach, especially single semester classes that are based off full year curriculums. SIA was tailored to fit the needs of Lake Park High School, but we continually struggle in one semester to provide students with the optimal learning experience due to time constraints. Time is constantly of the essence in SIA, along with the stress and scheduling conflicts that ensue, further compounding pressure throughout the semester. Regardless, we always take the necessary time to work our way through elaborate team and community building exercises at the beginning of every semester. Teaching content today means a sprint to the finish line, attempting to get through as much as possible before the end of the year. More and more, teachers are sacrificing the days at the beginning of the year that used to be utilized for ice breakers and “getting to know you” activities, instead skipping them and getting right to the content as soon as possible. Service learning courses must not succumb to the appealing idea of getting to the service as quickly in possible, because it will backfire. Fostering a safe and collaborative learning environment is necessary for the foundation of the course, but it takes precious time. Team and community building activities provide this required foundation, and they can be completed in many different ways. For those starting a service program (and all teachers in general), *The Caring Classroom* by Laurie S. Frank is an absolute necessity.⁴ In many ways, Frank’s book is a handbook to classroom community creation. While *The Caring Classroom* provides a framework for building classroom community, there is also a sense to crafting as you go the activities, limitations, rules, and guidelines in which these activities are based. Below are specific activities I have used during the classroom development stage; some of the activities were learned through conversations with other instructors (specifically Jim Arey of Elk Grove High School), attendance at the T.E.A.M. Conference at Northeastern Illinois University (some are from Chris Cavert and fundoing.com), countless hours on the Internet (Teampedia.org), as well as some I created. The point and purpose behind the community building activities is that students become familiar with one another, and then you continually develop those bonds to the point that there is a shared connection between all students. Further, the end goal is that all students are able to work effectively and politely with all classmates. In order for this goal to be achieved, the activities must be diverse and engaging. Three major goals of these activities are team-work, communication, and problem-solving.

Activities usually start with “name games.” Many instructors have a plethora of examples, yet my initial task is always to task students with learning everyone’s name immediately. Students go one at a time around the entire circle until everyone has accomplished the task, if one fails, the group starts over. An extension of the name game circle is “circle challenges,” where I prompt large group challenges. Students must pass/toss the ball to another individual across the circle and say their name. Once they accomplish this, the tasks get progressively more difficult by adding time plateaus, multiple objects, etc. Students will always work together to finish the task. Another meaningful group challenge is “the ABCs backwards.” Students must say the alphabet backwards

⁴ Laurie S. Frank and Susan H. Kaye, *The Caring Classroom: Using Adventure to Create Community in the Classroom and Beyond* (Portland, OR: Project Adventure, 2001).



while sitting in a circle, each student saying one letter at a time. The “solution” is to say it forwards, each student remember the letters he/she says, and then start at the end in reverse. Problem solving and communication is emphasized because they must work together. One other recommended activity is “rope challenges,” where students are challenged to make perfect shapes using a rope (generally 20-50 feet in length depending upon the number of students). Generally, students rush to be done first, not realizing that perfect shapes must be done with planning and execution. These are just a sampling of the countless team building activities out there. Find ones that work for you, and mold them to your populations. Community building must be done so that the bonds of trust and familiarity are formed amongst every student in the class.

In total, SIA spends around 3 of the 18 weeks on introductory course elements. The beginning three weeks are comprised of the following core activities.

- Explain the goals, outcomes, and expectations
STUDENT OUTCOMES
 - A. Empower young people to change the world
 - B. Embrace the class as an avenue to perform unique service opportunities (the purpose here is to give those students that may not have found a niche in the high school framework a chance to flourish and blossom in their own way)
 - C. Instill a sense of civic duty
 - D. Expand critical thinking and communication skills
 - E. Increase interest in service related occupations
 - F. Brainstorm and create individual and unique learning experiences
 - G. Elevate empathy for others by contributing in field experiences
- Encourage, inspire, and motivate students to be change agents
- Cover the waiver process and mandatory parent meeting
- Ice breakers and team building exercises
- Brainstorm potential service opportunities with students
- Assign students to make phone calls to potential locations
- Engage in learning activities on thought provoking topics

SIA uses the first three weeks to ease students into a new learning opportunity as well as to mold them into the mindset required for the semester. Spending three weeks is costly, yet it is non-negotiable due to its importance with molding the team environment. Students during the first three weeks are put into a position to excel as independent thinkers and trusting one another, while bringing their unique ideas forward to possibly pursue in service opportunities. Once student brainstorming is complete, the class transitions into actual action plans and forming teams to pursue service opportunities.



Volunteer and Experiential Opportunities Paired with Content Units

The curriculum for SIA is created through a mixture and combination of social issues, local topics, available local resources, and most of all, areas of student self-interest. Allowing students to offer input and opinion into the direction and focus of the course provides them with an opportunity to take ownership in their academic experience, something that has slowly been taken from them in other educational settings due to the implementation of standards-based curriculums that are test-skill dominated.

SIA has available days for students to actually engage in opportunities of their own suggestion, so we try to accommodate a diverse and varied amount of service opportunities. Ideally, service opportunities are embedded into a 3-4 week long unit that has to do with a larger social issue. Marrying a minor service experience with a content unit provides students with essential learning. Environmental awareness is a 3-4 week unit on the environment, students are introduced to local entities in the public service that handle issues around the community, the County Forest Preserve, local nature centers, and the school's Earth club. SIA brings in speakers from the groups to explain their purpose, educate our students on public service careers (which the speakers are currently living), and then we have on-site service opportunities. Service opportunities include removal of invasive species, seed collection, recording bird nesting habits, and water testing. For increased community connections, we invite Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts for badge fulfillment. Intergenerational Awareness is a study of different age groups and the issues they each face within society, engaging elderly groups in different sets of activities. Activities include minor home upkeep (raking leaves, mowing grass, and cleaning windows), traveling to assisted living communities outside of school hours for volunteer work, hosting a Senior Olympics (competing in various games with a student partner), or coordinating an Intergenerational Prom with catered food, a DJ with intergenerational tables. A component of this unit is to bring together different generations for awareness and oral history, while dispelling any misconceptions regarding the elderly populations of the younger population. Public service is integrated here because services to seniors are steadily declining with budget restrictions on the local government levels. SIA's education unit connects the class with the local park district and elementary and middle schools (when willing), to create programs where SIA students are given the opportunity to be an example. At the park district, our students have a rotating schedule of times when they travel to the park district to spend time at the pre-school. Additionally, entering into local feeder school allows high school students to be the model for younger students by teaching bullying prevention programs or tutoring. Teens Against Tobacco Use, for example, provides students the ability to implement an anti-tobacco program with the assistance of a local non-profit organization regarding prevention and substance minimization in local communities. Working with trained employees of local prevention organizations, students can teach mini-lessons to students in grades 4-8 in feeder elementary and middle schools. In conjunction with the program, students may host a "Great American Smoke Out" at their school for peers to pledge they would not use tobacco. Public service extends into education and park district entities multiple times throughout the year.



SIA is not a volunteer club, but rather a high level academic class that engages students on multiple levels. The learning piece is emphasized and never rushed. SIA, along with the other service course I have taught, PSP, have made an immense impact on the surrounding communities through well crafted and constructed service opportunities. Students have participated in many different service opportunities, but some have been particularly memorable. Each of the service activities is ideal because the topic being addressed can be translated with in-class activities and learning activities. Another example includes food drives; while food drives are a standard service opportunity, hosting one in the context of a service course allows for layers of expansion. Most food drives occur during Thanksgiving or the holidays, yet food banks operate year round and are generally in a constant need at all other times during the year. SIA performed multiple drives and initiatives during the year to raise food for local food pantries. One effective method for engaging the community, giving students independence and ownership, and raising significant amounts of food is to have students go house to house. In class, students prepare thousands of plastic grocery bags with a short note stapled to it. Each note simply says that the school is hosting a food drive and we would appreciate any offering to be placed on their front porch on a certain day. On that day, the students pick up any bags that are left on front porches. SIA has dropped off over 2800 bags during two different food drive initiatives. Marklund is another local organization SIA has strong connections with. Marklund is a multi-faceted non-profit organization that provides support to young people and adults with disabilities. Students visit Marklund consistently throughout the semester to experience the organization and interact with the residents on a volunteer basis. Part of SIA's focus also goes toward active military personnel and veterans issues. After exploring issues that are connected to branches of the military, students host a guest speaker from the Yellow Ribbon Support Group (YRSG). The YRSG sends packages to active duty military personnel. After learning about the origins and purpose of the organization from the founders, students will travel to the YRSG location to assist with packaging of materials for military personnel. Hunger and poverty is an essential unit for SIA. Feed My Starving Children is an organization that we recently set up opportunities with for our students to visit the location and participate in an in-depth learning exercise with employees of the organization. This learning component will be followed up with a session where students go to the organization to package food for malnourished individuals around the world. In some instances, where service opportunities are difficult to set up, we invite guest speakers to share their expertise with the class during a unit of study. Guest speakers we have hosted include: the Village Clerk, Village Trustee, Village President, active duty Peace Corps members, program coordinators for non-profit organizations, founders of non-profits organizations, and Relay for Life organizers.

One Capstone Event (Runs the Duration of the Semester)

Many of the academic goals in SIA are focused on developing the skills and knowledge base to make success in the post-secondary realm more manageable. In order to integrate many of the goals and objectives we plan to utilize, the students need to have the chance to implement a large capstone event for the financial benefit of a student-selected organization. Planning a capstone event takes an immense amount of time, dedication, and effort (both from the students



and teacher). Beginning stages of the capstone project include determining the event, choosing an organization, securing donations and prizes, planning logistics, execution, and then the debrief period. Students in SIA have successfully completed three projects, and unsuccessfully attempted one event.

First, SIA hosted a staff talent show for “Ronald McDonald House.” Students hosted an evening talent show where multiple staff members created and performed a variety of talent acts. The planning process took select days over a two-month period, during which students performed all the tasks that culminated in the final show. Securing acts, creating and distributing advertisements (flyers, letters to parents and community, announcements), and ticket production were all completed in the days leading up to the event. All students participated in varying levels on the tasks for preparation, but students did have other levels of expertise. Other preparation items included rehearsal organization and logistics, raffle item solicitation, lighting and stage crew, and sound booth work during the event. On the night of the event, over thirty staff members participated and over 450 people attended the event. With proceeds coming from raffle tickets, event tickets, and random donations, the event raised over \$2,000.

The second event was a dodgeball tournament for the Leukemia Research Foundation. During April of 2011, SIA hosted a student dodgeball tournament in the school gymnasium. As with all capstone events, students completed the registration materials, advertised the event, collected and compiled registration materials (fees and waivers), implemented a raffle, offered concession food and drink, and coordinated team playing schedules and execution of the tournament bracket. At the conclusion of the event, 124 students participated, 11 staff members refereed and participated, and over \$2,000 was raised.

For fall semester of 2012, students attempted to organize a Fall Fest/Kickball Tournament for Gateway to Learning and CureSearch 4 Children’s Cancer. Fall Fest/Kickball was the first event that was not executed for SIA. Unfortunately, the event was unable to be pulled together due to a lack of pre-registered applicants and uncertain attendance. Students completed the entire process, just as they had with dodgeball and the talent show (raffle, tickets, registration, etc.), but students did not respond with preregistered teams. Unfortunately, the event was cancelled due to lack of participation and potential weather concerns (the forecast was 41 degrees). The class still benefitted from the entire process, but was not able to see the event to culmination, yet we used the lack of execution as an important teaching moment.

In April of 2013, SIA hosted their most financially successful event, Dodgeball/Burger Day for Ronald McDonald House and Gigi’s Playhouse. On April 19, 2013, SIA concluded a fundraising process that raised in excess of \$4,000 for the two charities. For the first time, SIA also worked with a sponsor, a local family that owns and operates several McDonald’s restaurants. After securing the sponsorship of RJN Operating Co., SIA executed an event that sold over 100 shirts, 300 McDonald’s burgers, as well as a dodgeball tournament that had 178 student participants and over 250 spectators. Whenever SIA makes charitable donations from capstone events, we attempt to forge meaningful connections with the organizations through class visits to



their location or headquarters, or representation of the organizations at the event where money is being raised.

Debrief and Reflect (Also Occurs Throughout Semester, but an Overall Reflection at End)

Toward the end of the semester, students in SIA must participate in the reflection process. Assessing goals and progress throughout the semester is a requirement of all class participants. Regardless of experience, all students in SIA go through the steps of reviewing initial semester goals, reflecting on progress, and then debrief on the emotional and social hurdles of the previous five months. During these two weeks, visible and tangible emotion materializes from all students. I enjoy this experience because they begin to realize they have made an immense difference in many individual lives. Other learning activities I ask students to complete are course evaluations, surveys about their experiences, and to write a letter to next semester's students. Lastly, in-depth discussion and question activities occur in the last days to verbally reflect on the semester and their journey together.

The Teacher's Perspective

Teaching a service learning course is not easy. Challenges stem from the significant amount of work spent outside the class planning, organizing, completing administrative work, and building and fostering relationships within the community. Any teacher willing to embrace the challenge must know that this course requires time outside of the school day to complete the necessary tasks to provide students with an invaluable learning opportunity. The time invested in the class is paid back in full when the students have visible growth and understanding of the world and issues that exist within that world.

Success in teaching the course starts on the front end. Prior to every semester, I have found success in the following format to ensure the right students are enrolling in SIA. Due to the elective status of the course, any student is welcome to enroll, but some prerequisites have been put in place to make sure the class continues to trend positively. I would recommend the following process, or something similar, in the months prior to any semester the course will run. First, work closely with the counseling department and the administrator who handles academics. Providing them with a clear vision of the class will ensure students are placed appropriately. All students are welcome, but those who are joining the course for the wrong reasons will only have a negative impact. Second, ask the counselors to distribute an application to any interested student; this may be a point of contention due to the paperwork involved, but it is necessary for data collection. The application should include a self-assessment of standard personality characteristics, a history of service related activities, staff references, a parent signature, etc. Students filling out the form allow for a review of the individual student. Third, host a mandatory meeting the semester prior with all enrolled students. This meeting is a key component in the success of SIA, as it allows the instructor to debunk the many fallacies that will no doubt arise due to some of the positive components of the course. Specifically, students will think it is "blow-off" course, and that they will be missing school all the time to go out into the community. Neither of these is true, and



highlighting their misinformation earlier will eliminate some potential problems (this should also be revisited during the first days of the semester, as enrollments change). Upon completion of these, the instructor is able to partially assess elements of the students based upon their ability to attend meetings and meet deadlines. These factors and observations can prove to be fruitful when determining in the first week of the semester, if the student is indeed placed appropriately.

Pedagogically, the course is similar to any other social studies course in terms of drawing from methodologies and activities that are interactive and experiential. Teachers must have a complete and full understanding of their abilities and professional knowledge prior to teaching this class. Due to its unique nature, instructors need to keep an open mind and be willing to embrace flexibility and uncertainty.

The Student Perspective

Students thus far have been drawn to the course due to its existence in an age where standardized test instruction dominates all levels of instruction. SIA gives young adults the opportunity to attempt something new, while offering an avenue and passionate outlet for those that may not find their niche in athletics, drama, or music. While we embrace all students in SIA, it is imperative that there is an understanding of what type of student will be successful. In order to determine the right type of student, only one question needs to be posed to them, “are you willing to make a positive change?” From there, the students will generally embrace the core pillars of class community that make the course successful. From the many levels of feedback and conversations, students genuinely appreciate the freedom and privileges they are afforded in SIA, largely because of the restrictions and constrictions that have been placed on their natural standing as young adults.

All types of students are encouraged to enroll in the course, as every unique individual can bring a fresh perspective and set of background experiences. Throughout the journey of their SIA experience, feedback has been positive due to the array of experiences they are given during their semester. Specifically, students find the real life interactions with outside organizations to be the most beneficial. Throughout the semester, students will at some point complete the following activities: make phone calls to organizations where volunteering opportunities may be available, meet local government officials and discuss issues, ask for donations from local businesses, speak publically in front of the class and other large groups, distribute information and describe SIA to family and friends, work with pre-school aged students, interact with elderly populations, and keep detailed records of time spent outside of class.

The tasks are standard, but are educational opportunities that are far removed from the traditional classroom. Each of the tasks above reinforces the overall idea that students should be put into real life situations and take ownership over the outcome. Students taking SIA understand they have high expectations, but they are also understanding of the fact that sometimes mistakes are made. Regardless of the outcome, students are benefitting from the experience and



independence they can exercise throughout the course. Once students buy in to the ethos of SIA, they are fully engaged and will commit entirely.

Conclusion

My school's mission statement reads, "The Lake Park High School community will inspire in students a sense of personal responsibility and a passion for learning while challenging them to reach their full potential." SIA is a step in the direction of truly fulfilling that mission statement, something that I perceived a need for upon initially entering the school. Other teachers can sense the same for their individual buildings. Service courses align with the overall mission of most schools, specifically because the course encourages students to take responsibility over their ability to change the world and help others. Further, students who take this class are offered a constant avenue and ability to develop their own learning in areas of personal interest. Every student that enrolls in SIA is challenged to set ambitious goals, but will also achieve a great sense of personal fulfillment and responsibility. SIA's implementation into the curriculum of Lake Park is a positive addition to the overall goals of our district, and in turn, reform.