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Lessons from Service Learning Programs in Pennsylvania
Carl I. Fertman

Service is part of most schools. School staff and students participate in car washes, bake sales, dances, read-a-thons, and 5K races to raise money for national and local groups and community-based organizations. Other students and teachers provide thousands of hours of more direct service, working at hospitals, providing support services at the Special Olympics, cleaning parks, assisting at shelters and food banks, providing tutoring services, running hotlines, and visiting the elderly. Young people and their teachers can also be found speaking at public hearings, serving on policy boards, and visiting elected officials to talk about the needs of the community.

Similarly, in schools across the nation teachers and students are involved in the process of learning. In classes of all sorts, from science to English to the arts, students learn about themselves, about others, and about the world around them.

The process of linking these two goals—service and learning—is called service learning. Service learning seeks to build new relationships between academics and the community. The community becomes an extended classroom, where students apply their knowledge and practice their skills. Service learning builds a culture of service in a school that promotes participation in solving community problems, creating responsibility, and promoting ethics, caring, and learning.

This article is based on results of a review conducted between 1992 and 1995, which followed the progress of 62 service learning programs funded by the state of Pennsylvania during the three-year period. As part of the review, each site completed an extensive annual program profile, tracked student service hours and tasks, and was visited by a member of

an evaluation team to observe actual program implementation. The site visitor met with program supervisors, school coordinators, advisory boards, and students. Based on the qualitative evaluation findings, the article discusses ways in which schools can facilitate the linking of learning and service, ways in which individuals and organizations can help support the adoption of service learning, and the impact service learning has on students, teachers, schools, and the community.

What Is Service Learning?

Service learning can be defined as an instructional practice that facilitates the involvement of young people in real-life settings where they can apply academic knowledge and previous experience to meet community needs as a regular part of a school's curriculum (Alliance for Service Learning in Education Reform 1993). The service learning process involves preparation, service, reflection, and celebration. Service learning links community service and volunteerism with academic learning. It is not an add-on to existing programs within a school, but instead is incorporated into the school's curriculum. Service learning is a collaborative effort that brings schools, community-based organizations, parents, and other community members together in a common enterprise of individual and community growth (Fertman 1994).

Service learning is not a new concept. It is based on a number of existing links between schools and communities and can be traced to at least three sources: John Dewey, experiential education, and citizenship education.

John Dewey (1916) believed that young people need to confront and gain control over

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their environment. In dealing with social problems, Dewey said, young people put their intelligence and past experience into use.

The focus of experiential education, similarly, is learning by doing (Newmann 1989). Learning by experience encourages reflection on the process itself.

Citizenship education promotes participation in a democracy. Community service and volunteerism are essential components of citizenship education (Barber 1994).

There are a number of ways service learning can be established. However, two goals must be reached before a successful service learning project can be implemented: 1) those involved must aim to create a local community that views the school as a potential resource to assess and address the needs of that community, and 2) a school's vision must be shaped so that it perceives service as a way to give students a well-rounded education. When both views are in place, there is no limit to the possible gains that might emerge from service learning.

Enriching the Relationship Between the Curriculum and Service

Evaluations of the service learning programs funded by Pennsylvania from 1992-1995 yield three general observations about the nature of service learning.

Organizational Commitment—

An organization's commitment to service learning is key to linking service to the curriculum. Organizational commitment is the tangible and spirited guidance, reinforcement, assistance, and support provided to a service learning program by an organization. This commitment supports teachers and staff of community-based organizations (CBOs) as they explore opportunities and face the risks associated with trying to implement a new program. Three general areas of commitment have been identified, each with specific indicators that help to assess organizational commitment.

One area is the number of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community-based organization staff working to link service and learning. The second area is the allocation of materials, resources, funding, inservice training, and release time provided by the organization. The third area is judged by whether the organization has created a mission statement that focuses on linking learning and service and adopting educational practices that complement service learning.

Organizational commitment to the program can be assessed by tallying the individual indicators shown in Figure 1. This enables sites to determine the level and extent of their organization's commitment, and helps them gather data on their program's development.

Figure 1.—Areas and Indicators of Commitment to the Service Learning Program

Commitment Area	Indicators
Staffing	Teachers Administrators Students Parents CBO Staff
Resources	Materials Funding In-service Training Release Time
Policies and Practices	Mission Statement Teams Block Schedule Advisory Board

Service Learning Variety—

Service learning is different at each educational level: elementary, middle, and high school. It is easiest to link learning and service in elementary schools; the one class/one teacher aspect of most elementary schools allows a teacher to develop learning objectives around a service project that integrates all academic areas, and also permits more flexible scheduling. This structure makes grade-wide and school-wide programming less complicated than at the secondary level. The higher level of parental involvement in elementary schools makes excursions off school grounds more manageable for the teacher, and since there are usually fewer clubs and extracurricular activities in elementary schools, most service takes place during the school day.

Recent changes at the middle school level are making it less difficult to link learning and service at this level as well. Many middle schools now use teacher teams, joint thematic planning, student-centered curricula, and block scheduling in order to better meet the changing needs of the early adolescent. Also, the characteristics of early adolescence naturally lend themselves to service learning. During this stage of adolescent development, youth are more interested in social interactions than in academics. Service learning provides that interaction, allowing students to work with individuals and groups. In other words, it addresses their developmental *and* academic needs.

However, high school is where most school districts start their service learning initiatives. In many schools, the link between the curriculum and service is weak, with most of the service taking place outside of the academic classroom. Coordinating disciplinary themes and school-wide themes is difficult at the high school level, since teachers have time constraints and multiple classes. However, the use of intensive or block scheduling presents more opportunities for integration of service into a school's subject areas.

Continuum of Curriculum and Service Linkage—

The concept of a continuum of curriculum and service linkage is shown in Figure 2. The movement from one step to the other creates a low linkage-high linkage span undergirding the continuum. The stronger the link between service and the curriculum, the more likely it is that "service learning," rather than "community service," will take place. In theory, schools progress from one point on the continuum to the next, and increase the service and curriculum linkage at each point.

The service learning model of preparation, service, reflection, and celebration can be seen across a continuum of curricula and service integration. How the service learning method is applied across this service continuum provides a series of profiles, or pictures, of how curricula and service are often linked. The following descriptions elaborate on the links shown in Figure 2.

- *Service by a school club or organization.* Most schools have already participated in these types of community service activities. Food and toy drives, read-a-thons, and intergenerational and peer tutoring are regularly conducted by schools' Honor Societies, student councils, or school clubs. Sometimes the activities involve only the members of the group conducting the project, but often the entire school helps to collect food, toys, or money. While these activities cannot be defined as service learning, they do lay the groundwork for such a program by creating a culture of service in the school. Often, students and staff seek wider participation in these activities, and insist that this participation be considered part of the regular curriculum rather than an "add-on."

Figure 2.—School Service Continuum: Links to the Curriculum

School Club or Organization	Extra Credit	Special Events	Community Service Classes	Outgrowth of Existing Curriculum	Coordinating Disciplinary Theme	School-wide
<<< Low linkage					High linkage >>>	

- *Extra credit.* Some schools recognize the value of service by giving students extra credit. In some cases, the school arranges the service activity; in others, the students themselves seek the service opportunity. Typical service activities include helping in local hospitals or libraries; working in the offices of service, charity, or religious organizations; or helping at senior citizen centers. These activities are individual efforts and are usually not related to the curriculum. Some would call this kind of service "volunteerism."
- *Special events.* Many community organizations look to schools to help celebrate a special event such as a national holiday (Martin Luther King Day), a social awareness event (Earth Day), or a community activity (Special Olympics). Students are recruited to perform specific tasks at a set time, place, and day. These events are, for the most part, highly publicized and are recognized as beneficial for the community. They may or may not encourage links to the school curriculum.
- *Community service classes.* Some schools have a community service class as either a required course or an elective. In these classes, students learn the history of and the need for community service, and have an opportunity to become involved in a service activity. Although this kind of service is not linked to the curriculum of "core" subjects, it is linked to the community service class and so, to some extent, represents modest linkage of service and learning.
- *Outgrowth of existing curriculum.* In some schools, teachers use the existing curriculum as a basis for linking service activities. The curriculum is the driving force, and a service activity that satisfies existing course requirements must be found. This approach may be used with a fairly traditional curriculum, and it tends to be the most common form of curriculum linkage.
- *Coordinating disciplinary theme.* Instead of making service learning conform to the existing curriculum, some schools choose a service activity that is appropriate for selected student outcomes, and then identify components of the traditional subject curriculum that will support that activity. Thus, both the activity and the student

outcomes are focused on the desired results, rather than on matching requirements of the existing curriculum. With this method of linkage, it is important that student outcomes have at least equal stature with the achievements of the activity, so that when the unit is completed, both the academic *and* the service learning goals have been reached.
- *School-wide.* Perhaps the most advanced stage of linking the curriculum and service involves adopting a school-wide theme for service. This could be a year-long program, or it could last for only a few weeks. What distinguishes it from the two previous approaches is that the entire school, rather than just a few teachers or teams, focuses on one project, which is linked across the curriculum.

Participation of Individuals and Organizations

Service Learning Coordinators—

As part of the Pennsylvania model, each site has a coordinator: a designated individual responsible for implementation of service learning in the school. A coordinator can be a teacher, a principal, a district administrator, a community-based organization (CBO) staff member, or a community member. A coordinator's responsibilities might include writing proposals, designing a program, preparing reports, managing the program on a daily basis, recruiting interested teachers, keeping everybody informed, writing service learning curricula, organizing celebrations, arranging transportation for projects, giving workshop presentations, ordering materials, tracking hours, and building bridges between the school and the community. In some programs, coordinators are responsible for all of the above; in other programs, responsibilities might be shared among several people.

Although there are many different types of coordinators, they are *all* facilitators of change. Coordinators assess the service learning programming available and decide how best to link service and learning based on the resources at hand. They then must create an environment that is conducive to change.

There are a number of effective practices that coordinators use to link service and learn-

ing. Coordinators work to make service learning a core value in their organization. They strive to place it high on the agenda of those who make decisions: principals, superintendents, agency directors, and the boards of directors for agencies and schools. This is formally accomplished when service learning becomes part of an organization's mission statement or strategic plan.

Coordinators must also keep accurate records. Documentation and record keeping are often seen as a hassle, and therefore are frequently placed last on a long list of priorities. Putting documentation at the bottom of the list, however, will undermine its effectiveness. Accurate, complete, and easily accessible records are essential to document the achievements of the program.

Coordinators provide meaningful training for adult participants. Staff members cannot help to link service to the curriculum if they don't understand the process involved. Similarly, as a program grows and changes, its training needs also change. Coordinators from other programs are often the best source of training and information. Their knowledge is usually current, and often helps to connect many separate pieces into a coherent whole.

Effective coordinators create a service learning communication network. They understand the communication system, official and unofficial, in the organizations with which they are working. It is also important for coordinators to make connections with the people who make things happen in an organization. Although the administration and the school board are the formal decision makers when it comes to schools, other key people—parents, teachers, or community members—often influence the decision makers.

Coordinators support teachers as they embrace service learning as a teaching method. Putting the word out to all teachers or staff members is a good way to begin integrating service learning into an organization. One of the most beneficial things a coordinator can do is help teachers and CBO staff understand how they can properly prepare students for a service experience.

Effective coordinators also appreciate the uniqueness of their community. They take time to look at the community and understand its strengths and struggles. They consider the community's natural resources and assess the community members and their needs. Starting from this point, coordinators are able to design, support, and initiate appropriate service activities that have a high probability of being well received and supported.

Coordinators create an environment where students are equal partners in a program. They energize a program by continually creating situations where students can be involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating. This energy is a resource that supports both the students' learning and their commitment to service.

Coordinators should also try to take time to reflect and learn. Although reflection for participants is built into the service learning model, it is an essential tool for a coordinator as well. Those who take time to reflect after each activity, event, program, project, and year can learn from their mistakes and successes, and can improve plans for future programming.

Collaboration—

Collaborations, like coordinators, come in different forms. The smallest scale is teachers collaborating with other teachers in a single school building, usually by sharing ideas about possible service learning activities. Although this type of collaboration may start small, it can grow into something much larger that includes many teachers and staff members. Different schools can collaborate with each other within a school district: for example, when high school students tutor elementary school students. Schools and community-based organizations can also collaborate with each other, usually by arranging for students to do service in the CBOs. Finally, schools or CBOs can collaborate with the community itself, by having students work, for example, with the parks and recreation department, political leaders, or active citizens.

Collaboration is about community-building; it focuses on sharing. Organizations share time, resources, services, and celebrations. Partners in successful collaborations understand that the collaboration will result in a product. The partnership is a joint effort that will have an impact on the community.

Although there are many types of collaboration, most effective collaborations share the key element of balance between partners. There are a number of practices that can be used to improve and expand the relationships between

partner organizations, and thereby strengthen service learning in general.

1) Collaborative relationships are ongoing. They may change over time. A relationship that is based on a community service program may evolve to facilitate service learning. There may also be personnel changes within the partner organizations. Being aware of these possible changes enables collaborators to adapt to them.

2) Collaborators should establish clear and frequent communication with one another. They should alert each other when problems or concerns arise, and should also let each other know about positive outcomes. Effective collaborations give a voice to each partner involved, and include all partners in every aspect of service learning—preparation, service, reflection, and celebration. Collaborators must also understand each other's needs and expectations. Honest discussions about roles and expectations right at a program's start provide a foundation for collaboration. Schools and CBOs need to know why each party is collaborating and what each partner hopes to gain from the collaboration.

3) A strong advisory board can support the collaborative process. Although it is possible to have strong collaborations while still having a weak or nonexistent advisory board, it is also a fact that those programs with strong advisory boards almost always form strong collaborations. Some service learning coordinators choose not to form an advisory board because of the effort such an endeavor involves. Others indicate that while it does require a considerable amount of effort, an advisory board is worthwhile for the benefits it can provide. It is important to note, however, that an advisory board does not have to be large or formal to function effectively. It can consist of three people informally sharing ideas. In fact, many programs do not have a formal advisory board, but do have people who network on a regular basis. No matter what form it takes, an advisory board lends support to the coordinator and lessens coordinator burn-out.

When trying to form new partnerships, it is also important to remember that persistence pays. Clearly, collaborations do not always turn out as they were first envisioned. It often takes a while to work out all the kinks in a collaborative relationship. Sometimes the problems are never solved, and the best-laid plans for collaboration may fall through. If this happens, coordinators need to be flexible and try again elsewhere.

Collaboration brings people together. Collaborating encourages people to reach beyond their own organizations and build bridges with individuals and groups not previously connected with a school or CBO—to the benefit of all involved.

The Impact of Service Learning

Impact on Students—

Academic learning and personal development represent the core of the impact service learning programs have on students. Students discover through service that they can have a voice in the community, can have an intergenerational effect on how youth are perceived, can attain peer status in an adult work environment, and can become functioning and valued members of their communities. Students report other benefits, such as opportunities to learn academic subjects in new and challenging ways, affirmation of practical skills, exposure to real work environments, opportunities for career exploration and career testing, and practical experience to put on college and employment applications. Students learn to function in teams and are given a chance to develop their leadership skills.

Students who participate in service learning programs demonstrate concrete improvements in their engagement in school, which can be measured, for example, by reduced absenteeism, and more time "on task." Coordinators in the Pennsylvania service learning programs note that students are often more involved in learning in general. Students who were apathetic start showing interest by asking questions when they don't understand material in class. They also start to use school services (such as tutors) more often, and begin to take more responsibility for their own education.

Because of changes in the students' attitudes, teachers are able to view them in a new,

more positive light. The fresh perspective enables a teacher to relate to the student in a way that is advantageous to them both. One coordinator described service learning as a "shared responsibility," and said that he has begun to think of his students as colleagues. Another said, "now I am viewing my students not only as students, but also as *people*."

Many service learning programs use secondary school students to tutor elementary school students. Being on the other side of the teacher-student relationship gives the tutors a new understanding of and appreciation for education. One of the most salient features of this new attitude is the recognition on the part of students that they can impart knowledge to others, which gives them a much higher stake in their own education.

Service learning, in many instances, also brings together students who traditionally have not interacted with one another: those who are at-risk, older, younger, physically challenged, gifted, learning disabled, or of different races and religions. This fosters a spirit of togetherness and teamwork, and a greater understanding of others.

Service learning expands students' understanding. Through service, students have gained an increased understanding of social issues such as homelessness, literacy, and problems that face the elderly. They are able to clearly identify the value their learning will have in the real world. Their sense of civic responsibility is enhanced, and they are able to see first-hand the important role that they can play in improving their communities.

Students acquire a variety of important skills through service learning. They develop work skills, learn the importance of being on time, and discover how to communicate well with others. Group service projects are first-hand lessons on what it takes to cooperate and work with a group. In many cases, service learning gives students the self-confidence that leads, in turn, to development of leadership skills. Service learning also strengthens existing skills like reading and writing—especially when these skills are purposefully incorporated into a service activity.

Impact on Community Members' Attitudes Towards Youth—

While each site's experience is unique, the positive impact of service learning on the community is evident from feedback received from community members, school personnel, and parents. The most significant impact is the changing attitude of the community toward youth; service learning has shown the community that youth can make valuable contributions to society. Students offer energy and vitality that enhance the relationship between the school and the community and help to bridge the generation gap.

One result of service learning is that community-based organizations that were originally reluctant to allow young people to take part in their programs not only become reconciled to student involvement, but even eagerly request that more students join the programs. One coordinator phrased it this way: "Community members have come to view the students as having the potential to be contributing members of the community. The image of teenagers as being totally self-centered has changed...."

Impact on Service Learning Coordinators—

Service learning has not just affected students and communities; it has also had an impact on the people who make service learning happen. Most are teachers, some are administrators, and others work for community-based organizations. Service learning coordinators almost always feel that they are engaged in a worthwhile endeavor. This sense of personal satisfaction, however, is accompanied by busier schedules and higher levels of stress.

Most of the teachers involved find themselves performing unfamiliar administrative tasks. As coordinators, they attend meetings, fill out paperwork, interact with community-based organizations, generate publicity for service learning, and fight bureaucratic stumbling blocks. Those teachers without strong advisory boards or other support networks describe feelings of frustration as they try to make a service learning program succeed. Coordinators also relate that those teachers who are not involved in service learning often express resentment towards a program, asking questions like, "Why do your kids get to miss *my* class to do service?"

Despite the drawbacks, many teachers say that service learning has added new vigor to their teaching careers. They say that their relationships with students change for the better after working with them in service learning programs; this interaction enables teachers to

view students in a more positive way. Some also point out the benefits of working with colleagues in an interdisciplinary situation.

Impact on Policies and Procedures —

Service learning often results in concrete procedural and policy changes on the part of schools. Two of the most frequently cited changes are that schools start to: 1) award academic credit for service, and 2) allow release time for teachers to prepare service activities and for students to participate in those activities. Service learning in the ideal sense means that service is simply another avenue by which young people learn; service is incorporated into the curriculum. Awarding credit and allowing release time are important steps toward accomplishing this infusion. Another change has been that schools are opening their doors to community use. More community meetings take place in schools as a result of new ties and relationships developed through service learning.

Service is also now considered an important factor by many post-secondary educational institutions when they make decisions about acceptance and scholarships.

Many community organizations have also altered their policies to accommodate service by students. Some typical changes are to lower the minimum age for a student providing service and to waive the restrictions on the number of weekly service hours that students can provide. As mentioned earlier, community-based organizations demonstrate an increased willingness, and in fact eagerness, to have students performing service as a result of service learning programs.

Conclusion

Service learning is a powerful teaching methodology. It tends to reinforce existing relationships and to create new ones; in particular, it reconnects the school and the community. Above all, service learning seeks to structure a partnership between self-esteem and intellectual development that is at the heart of life-long learning.

This review of the status of service learning in Pennsylvania shows that much has been accomplished. Service learning is no longer an experimental program that questions its own viability and acceptance. The numbers of participants, beneficiaries, and hours in service learning programs are impressive.

Again and again, evaluations of these programs discover that through service learning classroom and curricula are reinvested with real-world experience; teachers find special satisfaction in managing, not dominating, the learning process; administrators are proud to point out to public groups, school boards, senior citizens groups, and even city councils the ways that the schools are supporting the community; citizens who were previously negative about young people become their biggest boosters; and community agencies that are severely underfunded suddenly find a new transfusion of volunteers to work for their understaffed programs. Most importantly, the students themselves frequently experience an emotional and academic growth spurt. One phrase heard again and again from teachers, parents, administrators, and even friends is, "I can't believe this is the same kid!" □

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