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Promising Practice for K-16 - Project Connect: School-University Collaboration for Service-Learning
April 1999

Introduction

Partnership is a recurring theme in education these days: partnerships between schools and communities, between colleges and nonprofit organizations, between high schools and elementary schools, and between K-12 and higher education systems. Whether one refers to the latter partnerships as K-16, Pre-K-H or K-PhD, what truly defines them is the level and type of interactions among the school, university and community.

It is fairly easy to develop a *thin* partnership between a college and a school, where college students perform some service to the school, learn about the teaching career and gain experience with younger students. It is extremely difficult to develop and implement a *thick* partnership between these two entities, in which students from both institutions serve, learn and enhance their skills. The collaboration described here examines many of the processes necessary for *thick* partnerships and provides insights into the ingredients of successful collaborations.

This ECS *Promising Practices Paper* describes the authors' experiences as a professor and teacher involved in Project Connect, an ongoing collaborative service-learning project between preservice teachers at Western Washington University (WWU) and 8th-grade students at Fairhaven Middle School in the Bellingham (Washington) Public School District. The project features strong academic components for both university and 8th-grade students that are designed to meet state and national learning standards, as well as opportunities for students to provide sustained, needs-centered service to community organizations. This paper describes the project's rationale, outlines how the project actually worked and reports outcomes for each set of students. It also provides recommendations for helping others create similar collaborations.

Project Connect Rationale

Educators at all levels of schooling are expressing interest in service-learning as a promising pedagogical approach. The collaborative service-learning project described here helps teachers meet many personal teaching goals and gives both groups of students rich, developmentally appropriate learning experiences in a context meaningful to them. Students also get an opportunity to explore their roles as citizens and to make a positive difference on an issue of their interest. Working together gives us — at both the K-12 and higher education levels — an opportunity to support one another in creating and implementing new curricular approaches at our respective levels.

> "I do think that my experience has changed me. I am more open to volunteering for stuff, even if it is just raising my hand to say my opinion or give an answer. Going to the food bank has also made me thankful for what I

Service-learning is a powerful way to enhance young adolescent learners' cognitive, social and moral development. Many goals set forth by the National Middle School Association's publication, *This We Believe*, as well as emerging academic standards established by state departments of education and national teacher associations, can be effectively addressed through service-learning. Students' cognitive development is enhanced as they prepare for service. In conducting research about their projects, students develop and practice the skills of acquiring, analyzing and interpreting information — goals set forth by the National Council for the Social Studies. Additionally, for middle school students, service-learning does the following:

- Provides a way for students to become connected to the community
- Gives students a chance to understand abstract concepts and international and national issues through the study of local issues
- Helps students become "intellectually reflective" youth who are doers and not just observers, as called for by the Carnegie Foundation in its *Turning Points* report
- Enables students to explore personal responsibilities and learn how citizens can participate in their government — all goals established for civics education by the Center for Civic Education.

Service-learning also contributes to middle school students' social and moral development. As students define community needs and brainstorm solutions to problems, they learn to connect the knowledge, skills and values they learn to positive civic action. Interacting with community agency partners and working together on projects help students practice their communication and cooperation skills. These opportunities for positive social interaction with adults and peers help students explore relationships in a new context. In addition, taking action to meet the needs of their community helps connect students with community members and reinforce pro-social behaviors.

Enhancing Preservice Teacher Education

There is also a growing interest in service-learning as a key component in teacher education programs, partially because service-learning provides education students with extended opportunities to work with young people. Researchers report the following benefits of incorporating service-learning into teacher education:

■ Increased self-esteem and self-efficacy (Wade, 1995)

■ Gains in thinking complexity (Batchelder & Root, 1994)

■ More successful student teaching internships (Sullivan, 1991)

■ Increased sensitivity to diversity issues (Seigel, 1995)

■ Stronger commitment to social justice (Vadeboncoeur, et al., 1996)

■ Better understanding of the social and psychological elements children bring to the classroom (Edwards, 1996).

> "Through service-learning, I have developed a higher level of communicating to strangers. It is easier to make conversation with people I'm unfamiliar with. I think that com-munication is a great skill to master."
>
> *– Jacob, 8th grade*

Project Connect
Overview

While the project is ongoing, this section looks at the project in spring 1999. In that year, the project lasted for just under five months (see the Timeline and Responsibilities Chart for a breakdown of tasks over those months). The 8th-grade students did the classroom portion in a two-period integrated social studies and language arts core class. The university students enrolled in a course titled "Seminar in Service-Learning." In both the university and public school classrooms, we identified community problems, researched current events, gathered varying perspectives on issues, and explored public policy using print and Internet resources. Students then established service action plans and spent one two-hour block of time in community agencies each week for eight weeks.

Working with the Center for Service-Learning on the WWU campus, we found placements for the 23 university students and 150 8th graders involved in the project. The placements ranged from working with city parks personnel on planting and stream rehabilitation, to working in day care centers, elderly care facilities, the food bank, a local AIDS hospice and an animal care shelter.

Preservice teachers transported 8th-grade teams to their service sites and engaged in service activities along with them. Both groups took part in reflective discussions on the return trips to school and followed the trips with journal writing. The 8th-grade students completed a final project with both individual and group components.

In this project, participants focused on several of Washington State's essential academic learning requirements. Through preparation, service, reflection and culminating activities, the following state goals and objectives were addressed:

Communication
- The student uses communication strategies and skills to work effectively with others.
- The student communicates to a wide range of audiences for a variety of purposes.

Writing
- The student writes clearly and effectively.
- The student writes in a variety of forms for different audiences and purposes.

Civics
- The student understands the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and the principles of democratic civic involvement.

Reading
- The student reads different materials for a variety of purposes.

> "The art of questioning is a crucial skill for the teacher in this learning environment. How do you access [students'] thoughts and feelings and help them articulate what is in their heads? I see the art of questioning as crucial in the traditional class set-up as well."
> — *Stephanie, preservice teacher*

Academic preparation for the 8th-grade students began two months before their work at the service sites. The students brainstormed potential service activities within the categories of "working with animals," "the environment," "working with elderly," "working with children" and "social services." Students were given a choice of working on projects from these five topic areas. Once each student had chosen a topic for his or her work, they took part in several activities to learn more about their topics.

From the outset of the project, the middle school students were required to compile a collection of current events reports related to their service topic areas. Students studied current events in the newspaper, on the radio, television and Internet to help them become familiar with issues. They then conducted research by locating pertinent

legislation at the U. S. Congress World Wide Web site. Prepared with information from the media and their Internet searches, students drafted legislation pertaining to their issues which they then discussed in a mock Congress.

Collaborative Service and Reflection Activities

On service days, students reported to their core class, recorded journal questions to be addressed and left for the site with their adult volunteers (either preservice teachers or parents). Before these adult volunteers were allowed to drive and chaperone students, they underwent a fingerprinting background check required by the state and were given information on sexual harassment. They also signed forms indicating they had private vehicle insurance. Additionally, students were required to return a field trip permission form signed by their parent or guardian.

Project Connect Timeline and Responsibilities Chart

Date	Fairhaven Middle School Responsibilities	Shared Responsibilities	Western Washington University Responsibilities
January	* Identify essential learning requirements to be met * Meet with district service-learning coordinator * Administer pretest to 8th graders * Introduce service-learning in core classes * Brainstorm issue topics with students and identify student interest areas * Identify theme areas * Begin current issues discussions	* Define project goals * Meet with Center for Service-Learning (CSL) staff to describe project * Call potential sites, work with CSL to identify and contact others	* Meet with CSL to initiate project contact * Construct pretest * Visit potential sites * Create packet to distribute to sites describing project * Create curriculum for seminar in service-learning

Date	Fairhaven Middle School Responsibilities	Shared Responsibilities	Western Washington University Responsibilities
February	* Continue current events discussions * Plan congressional simulation	* Continue contacting sites	* Research Web sites to use with 8th graders * Pre-visit sites
March	* Do congressional simulation * Research service-learning topics on the Web * Host guest panel of experts in topic areas * Identify parent volunteers to chaperone at sites	* Begin mapping site chart with times and students who will go to each site * Distribute and collect district volunteer forms * Create master schedule of volunteers, sites, students * Create individual site sheets with names of contact people, students, driver, driving directions and emergency phone numbers * Identify and contact potential guest speakers	* Promote service-learning opportunity in university classes * Identify university student participants * Confirm with sites * Begin service-learning seminar, spring quarter * Administer pretest to university students
April	* Begin service-learning field activities * Do weekly	* Greet volunteers and help them find the classroom * Introduce drivers	* Continue seminar * Do weekly reflective writing * Troubleshoot and

Date	Fairhaven Middle School Responsibilities	Shared Responsibilities	Western Washington University Responsibilities
	reflective writing * Create final project rubrics * Identify and work on final project topics	and students, coordinate departure from school * Visit sites	problem solve * Check progress with sites * Create post-tests
May	* Continue service activities and reflection * Present final projects * Administer post-test * Celebrate!	* Plan final celebration	* Continue service activities and reflection * Attend project presentations and celebration * Administer post-tests

Travel time to and from the sites was used as an educational opportunity. Students and adults discussed events and raised questions to be answered during their time at the site. The 8th graders and preservice teachers then spent their time on site working side by side, providing services needed by the agencies and organizations with whom they worked.

(Before service-learning)
"I don't really see myself as a community servant outside of school because I have a busy life, I'm lazy, and I don't feel a very strong need to go out and clean up in my spare time."

(Same student after service-learning)
 "I guess this experience has helped me understand how lonely old people are that are in nursing homes, and to understand what it must be like for them. I think it may have made me a little happier, giving me something to do. Also, it's given me a reason to go to school on Wednesdays. Before it was just like

> every other boring, pointless day, and I didn't want to get up in the morning."
>
> *— 8th grade girl*

Because reflection is the key component that leads to the learning in service-learning, education students and 8th graders engaged in reflective discussions as they returned from their site visits each week. Together, the students talked about what they did and how their activities and observations related to weekly news and the research they had conducted about local issues. The middle school students were required to write reflective journal entries each time they returned from their site. Students described the sites and the people they met there, analyzed how they made a difference at their site, reported on career possibilities they had learned about and explained how their experience had changed them**.**

In addition, they responded to questions or "journal prompts" that gave them a specific focus for learning each time they went into the field. The following are a few examples of journal prompts used with the 8th-grade students:

■   How is this experience meaningful and relevant to you?
■   What did you learn about yourself today?
■   What have you learned about career possibilities related to your site?
■   How has your experience changed you?

Writing about their experience gave students the opportunity to practice written communication skills in addition to helping them process their learning. Journal entries were collected and counted toward the students' final unit grades.

> "For a number of years, the Bellingham Public Schools have benefited from the participation of Western Washington University students in collaborative efforts to support student learning at all levels. The Fairhaven Middle School service-learning project is an outstanding example of how this university-school partnership can work to enhance learning for all of the involved students. In the school district, we are especially appreciative of university faculty initiatives to work with our teachers and administrators to design learning projects which give university students hands-on experiences while providing younger students expanded opportunities for learning support. Project Connect at Fairhaven offers a service-learning experience for both

In addition to the project presentation, the 8th-graders' accomplishments were celebrated through the creation of a public display of photographs for the middle school lobby, providing a sense of accomplishment and recognition for students. Selected photographs are also on display in the university's Department of Secondary Education and the Center for Service-Learning.

Outcomes

This project brought out the best in both the 8th-grade and college students. When a director of one of the elderly care facilities suggested one student might bring in something related to his interest in baseball, the student returned the next week with a framed collage of pictures which he shared with residents. Other students gained a concrete sense of accomplishment when the seedlings they planted at the beginning of their project showed substantial growth by the end of their time in the field. Preservice teachers returned with excitement from working with 8th graders, expressing confidence that they would be successful as teachers. Putting students in the role of helping others — whether younger students, animals or persons in need of health care — gave some of them a confidence that would be difficult to draw out in more traditional classroom settings.

"The thing I learned about myself today is that I can bring happiness and joy to others by doing the simplest task in the world — visiting and talking with people who rarely have that opportunity."

— *Enoch, 8th grade*

Several students said they would like to continue their community service, which serves as an inspiration to the adults involved. It is refreshing and exciting to work with students who want to explore their positive potential, and service-learning is an excellent way to help them discover what they can do. Through a systematic analysis of the reflective journals written by the students, analysis of the videotapes of their presentations, discussions and our own observations of the students' growth, teachers saw a tremendous positive impact from their service-learning experiences.

Specifically, 8th graders realized the following learning outcomes:

- Increased communication skills
- Greater knowledge of community issues
- Career goal clarification
- Awareness of the responsibilities of citizenship.

> "Service-learning is a tool that can effect a powerful change in students. It can reach the 'unreachsable' student and help those students to learn who learn best by nontraditional or hands-on methods."
>
> *– Kyle, preservice teacher*

An analysis of the weekly reflections and pretest and post-test questionnaires indicated that the preservice teachers also gained from the project in many ways, including the following:

- Hands-on knowledge of how to use service-learning in classrooms
- Enhanced teaching skills
- Greater understanding of middle school students
- Increased use of media to follow current events.

Challenges and Benefits of Collaboration

Although either of us could have conducted service-learning projects without the other, we found that connecting these two levels of students increased the impact of the project overall. Making the collaboration work for both levels of students required careful and thoughtful planning and a high level of attention to detail. As leaders, we met several times to outline project goals and objectives for each set of students, to define tasks and responsibilities, and to align the curriculum and school calendars for 8th-grade and college classes.

> "I think I will do volunteer work in the future because I think it is important for teens to get involved in something other than their own personal lives. I think a few teenagers give our whole social class a bad name. I want people to realize

Among the challenges we faced were the following:

- Finding enough time to plan together
- Matching university and middle school schedules and calendars
- Working within the time constraints of a two-period middle school core
- Creating buy-in for service-learning at both levels of schooling
- Aligning curriculum and activities to meet the needs of both middle school and preservice teacher curricula simultaneously.

Each challenge was addressed as it arose. Creative scheduling and continued open dialogue allowed us to identify and overcome each potential obstacle. The learning for both groups of students was enhanced through their interaction with one another — each group brought a unique perspective to the project and helped the other to reflect on events and experiences from a different vantage point.

We observed the following benefits for students:

- Preservice teachers provided positive adult role models for 8th-grade students.
- Eighth-grade students gave the preservice teachers a heightened appreciation for and understanding of the capabilities of middle-level learners.
- The collaboration gave preservice teachers an additional opportunity to work in schools.
- Increased numbers of drivers and chaperones enabled the middle school to use more service sites, which enabled 8th graders to have more control over their choices and therefore their learning.
- By serving and reflecting together, each group of students gained perspectives from the other.

As teachers, we also derived a number of benefits from our collaboration, including the following:

- Sharing responsibility for a complex learning/teaching approach
- Becoming confident in our ability to orchestrate complicated logistical details
- Strengthening each component of middle school and preservice teacher curricula by sharing teaching insights with each other
- Gaining personal satisfaction from teaching meaningful and relevant skills and information
- Becoming re-energized through innovating the curriculum.

Supporting Collaborative Service-Learning

To facilitate the development of Project Connect, we received strong support from both the Bellingham school district and the university. Perhaps most important, both schools gave us the freedom to try this innovative approach. Beyond that, Western Washington University supported the project by providing money to attend conferences related to service-learning prior to designing the project and a reduced teaching load during the quarter in which the actual project occurred. The university's Center for Service-Learning also helped contact community partners and find places for the service fieldwork.

Both the middle school and district administrators supported efforts to implement this project and helped explain the project to other faculty and parents. They also supported travel to national conferences where we have discussed this project. After the initial year of the project, participation in the Washington State Contextual Teaching and Learning Consortium — a federally funded project located at the University of Washington — helped us refine and further build our components. Without these strong levels of support, it would have been much more difficult to implement this complicated project successfully.

> "Unlike the classroom where learning tends to be abstract, historical or literary, service-learning becomes a powerful and real experience for students. Additionally, in practicing democratic responsibility, students learn about their own value to the society. This strengthens motivation, interests and self-power."
>
> *— Deirdre O'Neill, principal, Fairhaven Middle School, Bellingham, Washington*

Suggestions for Developing Collaborative Relationships

To develop collaborative partnerships, universities and school districts need to communicate about their individual and mutual goals. University professors can work with district offices and school faculty to identify needs and play a supportive role in helping schools establish service-learning projects. Teachers can contact preservice teacher institutions to determine which faculty might share their interest in collaborating. Attending or providing inservice workshops can help university faculty and K-12 teachers make connections.

Once a collaborative partner has been identified, the following recommendations will help establish a smooth working relationship:

- Provide preservice and inservice teacher training on the pedagogy of service-learning
- Provide released time for planning to create collaborative relationships
- Clearly define roles for community agency, university and school personnel

- Provide support to help teachers make community contacts
- Become aware of and address university and district legal requirements
- Recognize that collaborative projects are built through a number of stages and allow time for components to be developed, refined and improved
- Provide recognition for both teachers and university professors who engage in innovative collaborations.

The following steps can help ensure a quality service-learning experience for both middle school students and preservice teachers:

- Allow students the opportunity to choose their service topic/site
- Provide ample time for processing learning and bringing the project to closure
- Use a variety of reflection techniques and use reflections to guide student learning
- Give preservice teachers both classroom and field-based experiences during service projects.

Conclusion

Working in a school district and university system that value service-learning highly was of utmost importance. The school district has identified service-learning as a key component in its *Middle Schools of the Future* position statement; the university acknowledges the role of service-learning in its institutional mission statement. The opportunity to share the project at inservice workshops and professional conferences to the enthusiastic response of our colleagues has proved invaluable. Given the depth of learning observed in the students who took part, the response from community organizations and parents, and our own personal satisfaction, we will continue to refine the curriculum and provide this learning experience for middle school and preservice students.

"Project Connect offers a comprehensive model of what service-learning can be — a truly integrated, collaborative endeavor where students work with community to define needs, reflection is integrated throughout the project, and deep, sustainable partnerships are developed. Project Connect also brings WWU's commitment to youth to fruition by increasing opportunities for Western students to serve children and youth."

– Lisa Moulds, program manager, Center for Service Learning, Western Washington University

"This project is precisely the kind of collaboration Western Washington University endorses and sponsors. I am pleased that our Center for Service Learning could assist in this project, and I am looking forward to many more collaborative endeavors such as this. Through the successful implementation and dissemination of results of service-learning collaborations such as Project

Connect, I am confident that an expanding number of students at Western will be able to participate in community-based service-learning experiences and that our faculty will increasingly see the merits of these community-university connections."

– Kris Bulcroft, Center for Innovative Instruction, Western Washington University

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Resources/Organizations

The following organizations are resources for service-learning materials, curriculum and/or training and technical assistance services.

Compact for Learning and Citizenship Education Commission of the States www.ecs.org 303-299-3644	Learning In Deed: Making a Difference Through Service-Learning An Initiative of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation www.learningindeed.org 202-778-1040
Campus Compact www.compact.org 401-863-1119	
Center for Human Resources Brandeis University heller.brandeis.edu/chr 781-736-3770	National Dropout Prevention Center www.dropoutprevention.org 864-656-2599
Chronicle of Philanthropy www.philanthropy.com	National Peer-Based Service-Learning Training & Technical Assistance Exchange

202-466-1200	www.lsaexchange.org.
	877-572-3924
Close-Up Foundation	
www.flint.lib.mi.us/closeup/home.html	National Service-Learning
800-CLOSE-UP	Clearinghouse
	www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu
Constitutional Rights Foundation	800-808-SERV
www.crf-usa.org	
213-487-5590	National Society for Experiential
	Education
Corporation for National Service	www.nsee.org
www.nationalservice.org	703-933-0017
202-606-5000	
	National Youth Leadership Council
Education Week	www.nylc.org
www.edweek.org	651-631-3672
301-280-3100	
	Northwest Regional Educational
Institute for Justice	Laboratory
www.ij.org	www.nwrel.org
202-955-1300	800-361-7890
	Points of Light Foundation
	www.pointsoflight.org
	202-729-8000
	RMC Research
	www.rmcdenver.com
	303-825-3636

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