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Service Learning: A Natural Link to Interdisciplinary Studies

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Service Learning



A Natural Link to Interdisciplinary Studies

Service learning provides opportunities for students to care for and assist others, to reflect on their involvement, to enhance self-esteem, and to participate in school and community improvement.

■ As an interdisciplinary schoolwide project, students, teachers, administrators, staff members, and parents become involved and work to improve their school or address a special community need or issue.

In all cases, these activities involve cooperative efforts across virtually all areas of the middle level school curriculum.

By Sally N. Clark & Marina J. Welmars

Service learning, which involves young adolescents helping others in their school or community, provides a unique opportunity to integrate curriculum and school activities.

It can take the form of a school activity such as a club; as an interdisciplinary curricular unit; as a separate, required, or elective class; or as a schoolwide project.

- As a school club activity, service learning involves students in planning and providing a service.
- As an interdisciplinary unit, a youth service project can serve as a unifying theme that involves teachers from a variety of subject disciplines in creating viable and relevant learning experiences for their students.
- As a focus for teacher advisories (homebase, adviser/advisee), ser-

Benefits of Service Learning

Turning Points (Carnegie Task Force, 1989) suggests that, "Every middle grade school should include youth service—supervised activity helping others in the community or in the school—in its core instructional program." The program has also been recommended by educators and researchers such as Boyer (1984), Clark and Clark (1994), and Goodlad (1984).

In a review of quantitative studies, researchers found that student participation in effective youth service activities produced:

- Student gains in social and personal responsibility
- More favorable attitudes toward adults
- Lower levels of alienation and isolation among students with a history of behavior problems
- Increased student self-esteem
- Greater social competence, such as communicating effectively to groups, conversing comfortably with strangers, and persuading adults to take their views seriously
- Gains in moral and ego development (Conrad and Hedin, 1991).

The findings of qualitative research on service learning is equally convincing. Conrad and Hedin (1991), drawing from journal entries of more than 4,000 students who participated in youth service activities, report that:

- A helping relationship with another person is a much more compelling reason to act responsibly than are the demands and sanctions of school authorities.
- Youth service programs give students a sense of connection with a wider range of people, places, and problems.

Students reported in their journals that they learned a great deal from their youth services experience. In fact, 95 percent of the students indicated they had learned more from these experiences than they learned in their classes.

In drawing conclusions about the overwhelming number of students who said they had learned "more" from the youth service experiences, Conrad and Hedin (1991) state:



The "more" turned out to be a reference not so much to the amount as to the significance, not so much to new information as to more important and personal knowledge and understanding. The students were probing fundamental questions of life: Who am I? Where am I going? Is there any point to it all? They were thinking and writing about the basic issues of adolescence and beyond: relationships, significance, connections, suffering, meaning, hope, love, and attachment.

Integrating Service Learning: Processes and Examples

In addition to its success in improving social skills, enhancing self-esteem, and building responsible behavior in young adolescents, the many themes of service learn-

ing and the variety of experiences typically found in youth service programs provide a natural vehicle for integrating content and helping middle level students make connections with their world.

At Tortolita Junior High School in Tucson, Ariz., students and teachers have always valued service learning. Over the years, however, they have been frustrated by the inability to sustain comprehensive service learning as an ongoing part of the curriculum.

The effort to connect students to their community and to develop awareness of and response to the problems of the real world in which they live was always effective, but only temporary in impact and usually superficial in nature. Students

As in any change process, creating a service learning program begins with developing a vision, identifying a purpose, and determining an action plan.

soon became caught up again in their daily lives. It was too easy to forget what they had discovered about others and about themselves.

Gradually, many of the teachers realized they wanted more for their students and more from the school's tradition of community service. Teachers believed they could build more effectively on students' enthusiasm and idealism and create experiences that validated those characteristics in more meaningful ways.

Furthermore, as teachers were being asked to do more in the same limited amount of instructional time, service efforts needed to be integrated into the educational process instead of added to it.

Individually, in pairs, or as teams, teachers began to work from the same givens:

- The school is a suburban junior high school in an area with little sense of community, but increasing community needs and problems.
- Teachers and students are organizing in teams, but are still "settling into" the process of teaming.
- A strong tradition of participation in community service projects exists through clubs and advisory.
- Teachers are feeling pressured by a variety of demands on their time (a new portfolio-based assessment program, state-mandated additions to the curriculum that don't quite fit anywhere, and the desire to create an effective adviser-advisee program).

Some ideas about youth service and young adolescents influenced teachers to reframe community service as "service learning," a concept in which action flows from the learning and is supported by and supportive of the curriculum.

As a result of these shared ideas, service learning at Tortolita Junior High School has become an integral part of the curriculum in a variety of ways: through advisory (adviser/ advisee, homebase); as part of a student portfolio generated in language arts; in integrated units taught by an interdisciplinary team; or taught in an individual class.

Whatever the approach, tying service learning to the curriculum has many advantages for both students and the teachers or other adults involved:

- As they explore issues and apply skills arising from the content, students see a direct connection between schoolwork and the real world.
- Students discover that what they are learning does have meaning and value because they can see concrete results.
- The non-traditional student can make as valid contributions as the "school girl" or "school boy," positively affecting the adult's evaluation as well as the student's self-esteem.
- Because they need each other to make a project work, students build positive, supportive relationships that extend beyond the project or classroom.

■ Adults and students, working together to solve non-academic problems, see each other in different ways, communicate with each other more effectively, work together to make decisions, share visions and leadership, and develop trust and respect for each other.

■ The teacher can meet many objectives, which are usually taught in isolation and reinforced by drill and practice, in ways that are realistic and realistically integrative.

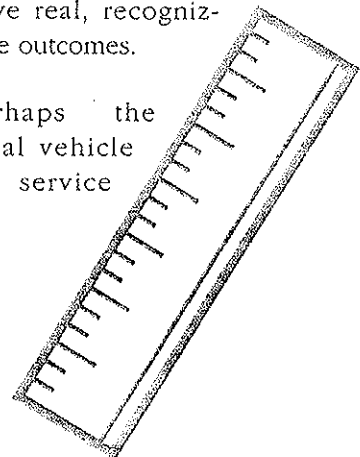
■ Everyone has ownership.

Creating a Service Learning Program

As in any change process, creating a service learning program begins with developing a vision, identifying a purpose, and determining an action plan. A variety of approaches to service learning have been developed at Tortolita, including exploring the news media to identify important community issues, focusing student research papers on current problems, and developing special materials for tutoring younger children.

All these approaches ensure students have opportunities to apply reading, writing, and communications skills; explore a variety of real situations in which the disciplines are blended; and take the lead in actions that have real, recognizable outcomes.

Perhaps the ideal vehicle for service



learning is the interdisciplinary unit designed and taught by an interdisciplinary team. Although this is difficult to achieve with hectic daily schedules, differing philosophies, and specific curriculum requirements, some approaches can be productive if they begin with teamwork.

Some curriculum mapping—listing major topics, concepts, and skills that each teacher is presenting during the year—is almost essential, and this can be the basis of service learning. The team may identify common concepts or generalizations that are addressed in different subjects and decide to teach them together as a theme; one teacher may recognize common threads that could be tied together through his or her discipline; or the group could decide to use a special theme from “outside” the regular curriculum to address a range of skills from different content areas.

One team at Tortolita selected the AIDS curriculum as the basis of an integrated unit, teaching the knowledge base in science, examining the legal response in social studies, reviewing the statistics in mathematics, and using language arts to develop a service project that involved a puppet show for younger students, a group simulation for the middle

school, a booth at the community AIDS Awareness Fair, and other activities.

Another team selected diversity as a theme, blending social studies content on immigration, literature from other cultures, science work on biodiversity, and a service project on preserving habitat.

evaluation and the opportunities for assessment are transformed when interdisciplinary studies are linked to service learning.

With integrative units, a variety of individual interests, skills, and learning styles are incorporated. When teachers develop integrative units tied to service learning, they

Young adolescents need to be needed; they need to feel that what they are doing has merit and worth.

Recycling and garbology served another team as a focus for content area reading, persuasive writing, science information, graphs and surveys in mathematics, and an introduction to archaeology in social studies.

Since service learning pushes students from information to action—a focus that is inclusive rather than isolationist—the emphasis on higher level thinking in related interdisciplinary studies is natural and dynamic. Students deal with cause and effect, comparison and contrast, fact and opinion. They make decisions, draw conclusions, set criteria, and support arguments using critical thinking skills and problem-solving techniques that they traditionally have only been exposed to in print.

are allowing that diversity to flourish and be validated.

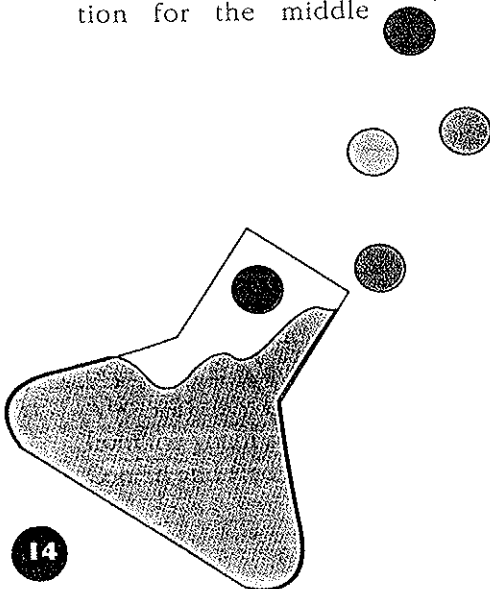
Within the interdisciplinary/service learning setting, views of young adolescents are broadened from academic achievers to include visual artists, motivational leaders, computer whizzes, public speakers, performers, craftspersons, and technicians. The non-traditional student plays an integral part in the action and is valued and evaluated for his or her contributions.

From the synergistic connection between the learning and the service emerge innumerable opportunities for reflection and self-evaluation, performance-based assessments, and portfolio building.

Summary

Because the integration can emerge from a variety of needs or commonalities, service learning can become a team project or an effort by a single class, a “one-shot deal” or an ongoing effort, a school-based or community activity. There is no right or wrong way to do this; there are no set-in-stone models.

As they plan and work on service projects, students apply what they have learned in the classroom, constantly interweaving and restructuring the subject areas, making their own meaning as the context of the teaching/learning expands. Similarly, the nature of



What you try to do must be determined by your own circumstances.

The absolute essentials of any service learning program, however, remain the same:

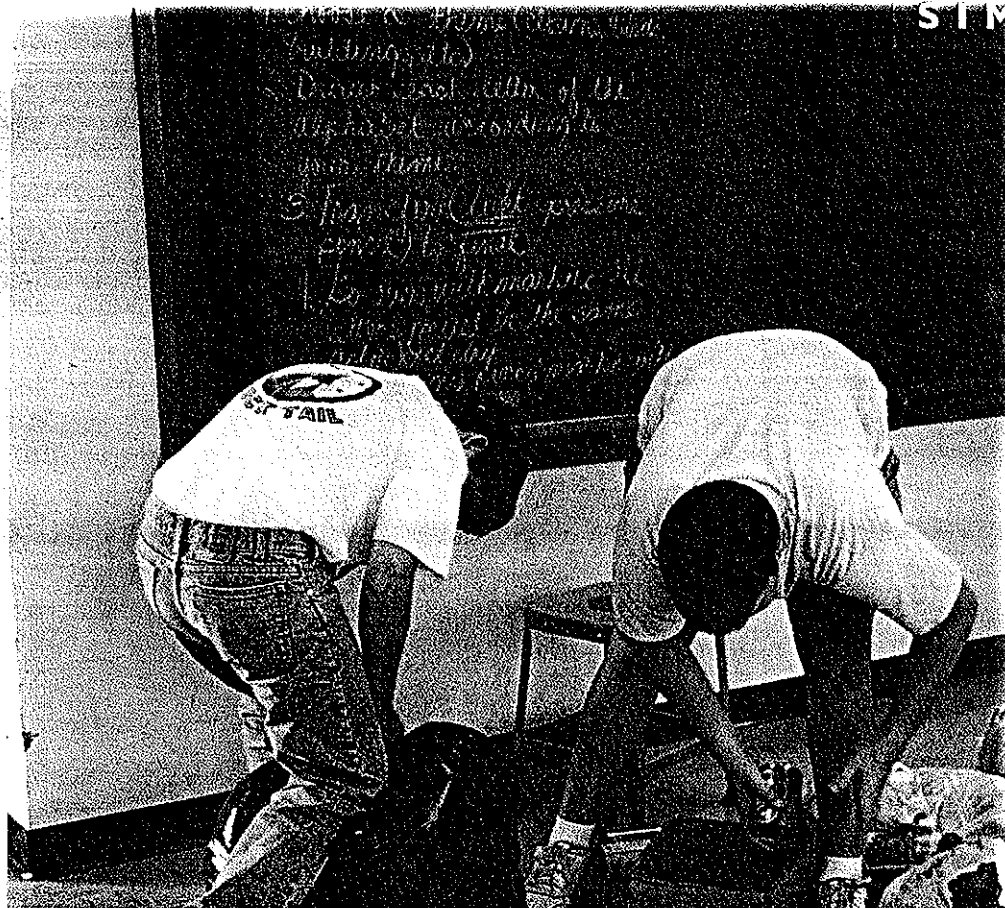
- Start small
- Find support
- Be flexible
- Think it through
- Talk about what's going on—with the team, with parents, with students, with administrators, and with the news media.

Above all, don't be afraid to start! Young adolescents need to be needed; they need to feel that what they are doing has merit and worth. Although we as adults are sure the skills we teach will be important in the future, students will be much more easily convinced if they are actually using those skills now.

When they are working to solve a problem they care about and discover they need to go through channels, they will learn to write a persuasive letter. When they are trying to plan a project and realize they need to raise money, they will find out how to budget their time and funds. When they care, they will learn; when they learn, they will act; when they act, they will understand.

The curriculum will have meaning if it has purpose; the students will master it if it serves their needs and if they see results.

Whether you connect service learning to your advisory program, to a specific discipline, or to an interdisciplinary unit, you can provide a vital link between school



and the "real world," between the classroom and the future.

By involving your students in service learning, you enable them to assist others, to lead, to create visions, to build self-awareness, to make informed decisions, and to communicate effectively.

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