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## Service Learning Through Disaster Relief

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**Abstract:** The Rock County 4-H Disaster Relief Committee raised \$1,550 to aid tsunami victims in Sri Lanka and then turned its attention to Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. Thirty-one 4-H youth participated in a service learning trip to the South with the objectives of helping hurricane victims, learning about new cultures and achieving personal growth during three days of service projects in Louisiana and Mississippi. Their written reflections and other evaluative measures revealed they learned about southern culture, gained a greater appreciation for their lives, gained self confidence and developed a desire to help others more often. The trip was a valuable developmental experience for the youth, and information from the trip could be utilized to create similar experiences based on service learning. This article provides an overview of the trip and describes the evaluation methods used to measure learning and assess personal growth.

### Introduction

Through participation in community service projects, 4-H youth develop valuable life skills such as leadership, cooperation and self-awareness. They apply those skills in their daily lives and become productive, caring citizens of their communities.

Perhaps even more valuable than participation in community service is service learning. According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, "Service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others...to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves" (National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, 2001). The formation of the 4-H Disaster Relief Committee and the service learning trip to Louisiana were the first efforts intentionally focused on service learning in the Rock County 4-H program.

Shortly after the December 2004 tsunami, Rock County 4-H hosted a presentation by a Sri Lankan family who was directly affected by that disaster. As a result, the Rock County 4-H

Disaster Relief Committee was formed. During fundraising events coordinated by the youth and adults on the Rock County 4-H Disaster Relief Committee, a total of \$1,550 was raised and donated to the Salvation Army. That donation was designated to build 1½ homes in Sri Lanka.

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the southern United States in August 2005, the committee focused on relief efforts for those disaster victims. They felt they had addressed the "*I pledge...my hands to larger service...for my world*" portion of the 4-H pledge through their fundraising for Sri Lanka. They now wanted to do something meaningful "*...for my country.*"

Specifically, the youth on the committee expressed interest in a hands-on relief project for victims of Hurricane Katrina. Through my personal contact with a high school teacher in Franklinton, Louisiana, the youth learned of the damage sustained in that area. Culturally, Franklinton is quite different from towns in Rock County, which presented an opportunity for the Rock County 4-H youth to learn about southern culture as well as develop life skills through a service learning trip to the South.

### **Program Design**

The trip was designed as a service learning experience according to the four main elements of service learning as defined by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (Potts, 2001). Those elements are:

1. Youth leadership. The 4-H members initiated the trip and were involved in some of the decision making.
2. Community need. The specific local needs were well established through personal contacts in the area.
3. Curricular connection. Participants received informal instruction on southern culture.
4. Reflection and evaluation. A pre-post test on cultural differences was administered and a variety of reflection activities utilized during and after the trip.

The Rock County 4-H Disaster Relief Committee defined the objectives for the trip, determined the budget and in-kind donation needs, and developed a fundraising plan. The trip was entirely funded through donations obtained by the committee and trip participants. A total of \$10,000 was raised for transportation, meals and supplies. In-kind donations included bottled water, snacks, t-shirts, sunscreen, insect repellent, disposable cameras, work gloves and shovels.

A total of 31 youth in grades 8-13 participated in the service learning trip in June 2006. The five-day experience included two days of travel and three days of service projects. Two days were spent planting trees and rebuilding shelters at a Camp Fire USA youth camp in Louisiana. One day was spent helping individual homeowners clean up debris and paint newly rebuilt homes in Biloxi, Mississippi. The Rock County 4-H group was housed free of charge at a Louisiana State University (LSU) Forestry Camp. Local LSU Extension staff, 4-H/FFA members and their parents prepared meals and provided educational and recreational activities in the evenings.

The primary evaluation method used for the service learning experience was reflection. Reflection is effective because it "...gives meaning to the experience...can create a sense of accomplishment...fosters life-long learning skills...clarifies values... acknowledges skills gained and builds confidence" (National Youth Leadership Council, 2005). As not all youth respond positively to all types of reflection activities, a variety of reflection activities were carefully

planned and implemented during and after the trip. Refer to Appendix A for a description of reflection activities utilized.

### **Program Impacts and Success**

The 31 youth who participated in the service learning trip planted over 1,500 pine and oak tree seedlings at Camp Teca Towazi in Louisiana. They rebuilt benches in several shelters at the camp. Those efforts will directly benefit the youth campers, counselors and adult staff who utilize that facility for day camps each year and are in need of shaded areas in which to conduct their programs.

The leadership of a church in Biloxi, Mississippi identified specific neighborhoods and homeowners who had requested help with clean up and rebuilding. Divided into three smaller groups, the trip participants assisted a total of six homeowners in Biloxi with debris clean up, yard work and house painting.

Prior to the trip, the youth participated in an orientation that included a pre-test on various aspects of southern culture. A post-test was administered at the end of the trip. This pre-post test was the only quantitative method used to assess learning. The test scores increased by an average of 13.3% even though a few of the aspects were overlooked during the trip. A breakdown of the increase in scores for questions related to specific aspects of culture reflects which aspects were given more attention (Table 1).

**Table 1**

Increase in pre/post test scores grouped by aspects of southern culture

ASPECT OF SOUTHERN CULTURE	% INCREASE IN TEST SCORES
Climate	26.4
Demographics	20.0
History	19.1
Industry/Agriculture	11.9
Geography	5.7

Most of the learning related to southern culture occurred through informal discussions on topics in which the youth were most interested. Much information was shared by local residents who interacted with the trip participants on a daily basis, and this daily interaction proved to be the most effective method of teaching the youth about southern culture. As the trip progressed emphasis was shifted from learning about cultural differences to enhancing personal growth through discussion and reflection.

The service learning trip participants expressed the significance of their experiences very effectively through numerous reflection activities during and after the trip. The written reflection pieces included the journal entries, county award forms completed ten weeks after the trip and six-month follow-up evaluations for a total of 42 written pieces from 31 youth. In an effort to quantify some indicators of personal growth, the number of times a key concept or phrase was mentioned in a written reflection piece was recorded (Table 2). It was also noted how many different youth mentioned a specific concept or phrase, as some youth referred to the same concept more than once.

**Table 2**

Recurrence of key concepts or phrases in written reflection pieces

KEY CONCEPT OR PHRASE	# OF TIMES MENTIONED (N = 42)	# OF YOUTH RESPONDENTS (N = 31)
Gained appreciation for things in my life; not going to take so much for granted from now on	16 (38.1%)	12 (38.7%)
The experience changed my life	11 (26.2%)	9 (29.0%)
It was rewarding/it felt good to help others	10 (23.8%)	9 (29.0%)
Want to help more, either in the South or at home	8 (19.0%)	8 (25.8%)
Learned about cooperation/responsibility; gained self-confidence	8 (19.0%)	6 (19.4%)
Learned about life in the South	6 (14.3%)	6 (19.4%)

### Discussion and Implications

It is important to take age and maturity level into account when involving youth in service learning activities. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade youth in this project had a more difficult time physically exerting themselves in the heat and humidity than the older youth. They were also more difficult to motivate.

Utilizing reflection activities as a method for assessing personal growth can be very effective if properly planned and implemented. However, it does take a great deal of time to read and analyze the qualitative data obtained through such activities.

The nature of the experience's effect on the youth was fairly consistent, but the depth of that effect varied greatly among individuals. The 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade youth tended to use phrases such as "I had fun and learned a lot" while the older youth expressed much deeper insights. They articulated the effect of the experience by describing specific skills they utilized and learned to appreciate. They used such terms as responsibility, acceptance and self-confidence in relating what they learned about themselves.

The service learning experience does not end when the trip is over. It is necessary to maintain a relationship with the youth to insure their learning is applied to projects addressing local community needs.

Documenting the personal growth of program participants is an ongoing process. Continued evaluative efforts are necessary to determine if the program experience contributed toward changes in the participants' attitudes and behaviors.

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## Appendix A

### Evaluation Plan – Reflection Activities

#### Activity: Journals

##### *Description:*

Each participant was provided with a composition book at the beginning of the trip. The book was labeled with the participant's name and a list of prompt questions was attached to the inside front cover.

##### *Instructions:*

Participants were asked to write their personal thoughts and feelings in the book on a daily basis. They were encouraged to use the prompt questions if they felt they needed some guidance in what to write. Journal writing was especially encouraged during time designated at the end of each day. Written and verbal directions clarified that the journals would be collected and read by the faculty member, then returned to the participants.

##### *Notes:*

As the most structured of the reflection activities, journaling definitely yielded the most valuable results.

#### Activity: Graffiti Wall

##### *Description:*

Large sheets of flipchart paper were taped to the wall in the main room of the lodging facility. A variety of markers were available at all times.

##### *Instructions:*

Participants were told they could write personal reflections on the paper at any time. The reflections could be read by everyone but would remain anonymous unless others observed who wrote them.

##### *Notes:*

Effectiveness could have been improved by providing more specific instructions and designating a specific time each day for this activity.

#### Activity: Suggestion Box

##### *Description:*

A covered shoebox, slips of paper and markers were placed on a table in the main room of the lodging facility.

##### *Instructions:*

Participants were told they could write personal reflections on slips of paper and place them in the box at any time. The reflections would be anonymous and would only be read by the faculty member.

*Notes:*

As with the Graffiti Wall, the effectiveness could have been improved with more instructions and a designated time each day.

**Activity: Group Discussions**

*Description:*

The entire group was convened at the end of each day for discussions facilitated by the faculty member. If time and the situation allowed, such discussions were also held during breaks at the service project sites.

*Instructions:*

The faculty member used the journal prompt questions as a guide for group discussions but encouraged discussion beyond those questions. The faculty member kept written notes of all group discussions. The other adult chaperones helped with note taking so the faculty member could concentrate on facilitation.

*Notes:*

Group discussions were utilized primarily to assess participants' personal growth. Some group discussion time could also have been focused on how the participants' experiences related to southern culture and what they were learning about cultural differences.

**Activity: Six-month Follow-up Tool**

*Description:*

A reflection tool of four open-ended questions was mailed to participants approximately six months after the trip.

*Instructions:*

Participants were asked for their complete and thoughtful responses. They were requested to e-mail responses to the faculty member or mail the hard copy back in the enclosed envelope. Hard copy responses could remain anonymous.

*Notes:*

Response rate could have been improved by revising the format from all open-ended questions to different types of questions, or by giving the tool to those participants in attendance at various county 4-H meetings.