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The Democratic Aims of Service Learning

Rick Allen

With strong schoolwide and community support, service learning can connect students' academic and civic lives and encourage them to be more responsible for their learning.

In the past decade, two U.S. presidents—from opposing political parties—have lauded the value of service learning in their speeches and even followed through with financial support for the initiative in their budgets. Both President George W. Bush and former President Bill Clinton have touted service learning as a chance for students to apply the content of their studies and character to real problems in their communities.

What is this relatively new school practice that the federal government includes in its \$43 million annual Learn and Serve America budget? Why do many educators, community members, and families still think that service learning is an extracurricular do-goodism that distracts students from valuable seat time in the classroom? Does service learning live up to its advocates' claims that it motivates students to learn more deeply and experience democratic values more tangibly?

More Than Volunteering

At its best, service learning goes beyond volunteerism because it increases students' personal involvement in academic and civic life.

"I'm all for volunteering. We don't honor it enough. But volunteering is an effort that focuses on the service," says Terry Pickeral, Executive Director of the Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education Commission of the States in Denver.

The academic goals of service learning distinguish it from volunteering. For example, students can plant shrubs around streams to make the habitat productive for salmon and leave it at that. But a service learning approach also focuses on the academic content so that students understand why they are planting certain trees on the bank and other kinds of trees farther back, why the streams may be polluted, and what conflicts may exist between builders and environmentalists over the condition of these streams.

So far, research on the ties between service learning and academic achievement has been anecdotal. According to researcher Shelley Billig, the anecdotal evidence indicates that when service learning has a strong connection to standards, its student-centered, constructivist approach clearly benefits classroom practice. Billig now heads a research project to determine correlations between service learning programs in Michigan and student scores on the Michigan Educational Assessment of Progress.

Bolstering Civic Life

But what about the goals of the service side of service learning? Like many others, Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College in Oakland, California, is concerned about the decline in

the number of young people who take part in civic life. A recent report showed that voting rates for those ages 18–24 dropped from 50 percent in 1972 to 32 percent in 1996 (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999). Kahne says that a special goal of service learning is—or should be—to boost students' interest and future participation in civic life.

"Volunteerism is different from collectively figuring out a response to a major social issue," Kahne says. The degree of sophistication about understanding civic life that students gain from their service learning experience depends on the project's design and intent, he says, but the goal should be to gain the ability to critically examine and respond to social issues.

"There's a lot of evidence that students are turning to volunteering instead of getting involved in politics and in institutions," Kahne says. But volunteering is not enough, he says, and service learning can help teach important skills for civic participation.

Degrees of Civic Involvement

Kahne studies the impact of K–12 service learning on what he calls students' *civic capacity*, their ability to be good citizens. Kahne divides good citizens into three types. The *personally responsible citizen* works and pays taxes, votes, and may give blood. The *participatory citizen* is more active in the community. He or she may sit on the school board or other official bodies and could be the one who organizes a food drive, suggests Kahne. The *social reformer* takes activism to a different level because he or she focuses on eradicating the root causes of social ills. Service learning in K–12 mirrors these categories of civic involvement, says Kahne. He adds,

Some types of service learning include the notion of charity—that students who visit senior citizens will become nicer people. This type of activity socializes students to be charitable to others.

Students who clean up a riverbank take on a more active role and gain skills for making change, but they are not intent on social change. The social reformer service learning project, however, is a "far less commonly endorsed vision, especially in public schools," according to Kahne.

To promote democratic values through service learning projects, Kahne recommends that educators weave social analysis throughout their projects. Social analysis makes the work more rigorous than a mere postproject reflection. Through social analysis, students try to understand a social institution's current situation and then envision an improvement to which they can actively—and collectively—contribute.

Students in the Public Square

At Perry Meridian High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, 12th grade students in Rosemarie Kuntz's government classes have teamed up for the past three years with transportation officials at the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization to study ways to reduce traffic congestion in the city. After hours of doing research, attending neighborhood meetings, and conducting community surveys, one group of students proposed the construction of a monorail system for the city.

Students drew on their skills in math, budgeting, mapping, and design to create a PowerPoint presentation of their proposal to the transportation officials.

"I learned that citizens do have a voice in what goes on," says Theresa Trackwell, a graduating senior who worked on the monorail project. "It's important to make time to share your ideas and have officials take account of them."

Teachers involved in service learning projects believe that local officials find projects led by students more credible because students are perceived as being less partisan than adults. Community members also respond more vigorously to student surveys, say other teachers. Kuntz notes that

There are no limits to service learning. It depends on the creativity of students and teachers connecting with needs in the community.

Crucial Support

The success of service learning also depends on schoolwide support for the program, an advantage that Meridian students have had since the school included service learning in its improvement plan seven years ago. School administrators saw service learning as a way to

encourage students to be more responsible for their learning and more committed to their community.

Meridian students often team up with partners from local government agencies, businesses, and other service organizations, from hospitals to homeless shelters. A team of judges—including educators, local officials, community members, and guidance counselors—also evaluates the goals of each project before students begin.

Anticipating the needs of a growing metropolitan area was among the service learning goals that gained Meridian its designation as a Service Learning Leader School by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that promotes and funds volunteer efforts. At Meridian, 13 academic departments recently conducted 39 separate service learning projects.

Twelfth grade students in a psychology class, for example, invited a mental health expert to talk to them about the common problems faced by local teenagers. The students then wrote and distributed a voluntary survey in the school and learned that fellow students wanted more information about dealing with stress, setting goals, and preventing suicide. In family and consumer science classes, students crafted toys to help establish friendships with children and families in a shelter for victims of domestic abuse. And students in Spanish classes have the option to teach the language to students in nearby elementary schools.

As service learning coordinator, Kuntz helps teachers make the connections between the academic and service learning curriculums by offering professional development, assisting with writing grants, and facilitating community partnerships. She also helps students determine how their projects meet state content standards. The school's full-scale support has been crucial to the success of the program.

Learning and Social Justice

Service learning is a mandated part of the K–12 curriculum in Philadelphia's 264 public schools. Students must do their first service learning project between kindergarten and 4th grade, a second between 5th and 8th grade, and a third project in high school. Kenneth Holdsman, director of service learning for Philadelphia schools, says,

Because young people in cities have serious issues and problems in their faces everyday, and many of those problems have implications for social justice—such as race, class, and power—we try to have students and teachers together explore the root causes of problems.

Holdsman admits that the projects sometimes do raise controversy, but whether that happens depends on the intellectual and social depth of the teacher, students, and community partners. “When teachers and students are inclined to go deeper and explore the darker side of issues, they can see the complexities unfold,” he says.

Eighth graders at Philadelphia's Warren G. Harding Middle School, where 75 percent of the students come from low-income families, used their service learning project to find ways to debunk society's stereotypes about inner-city students as unmotivated youngsters bound for a life of crime, drugs, and marginalization.

Harding students researched the history of different groups that have been stereotyped, including women, children, African Americans—even American colonials by their British overlords.

To work against the bias that inner-city students don't care about learning, students set up an intergenerational network of mentoring. Each student found an adult to mentor him or her through middle school and into high school. And Harding students in turn mentored nearby elementary school students three times a week. The long-term goal of this service learning project is to increase the chances that students will be motivated to stay in school, says lead teacher Stephanie Junod. Besides gaining leadership skills from mentoring and research skills through social studies, students also used critical thinking skills to record and analyze incidents of stereotype usage in the popular media, among their friends, and in their own conversations.

Junod's students also wrote grant applications to secure money to fund their project, a process that taught them about budgets, percentages, and other math skills. Junod gave students the district and state benchmarks for relevant subject areas so that they could better understand curriculum alignment.

"I let them plan as much as possible," says Junod. "You can see the difference in their motivation when I plan the activities and when they plan them."

For a final presentation at Philadelphia's National Liberty Museum, students created visual displays—including murals, poems, and even a commemorative bench—to explain to city officials, family members, and the local media how they learned to fight stereotypes in their own minds and in the minds of others.

As part of the service learning project, Harding 8th grader Sivoston Messam helped his 1st grade pupil in reading and writing and imparted his own love of puzzles to the younger student. Messam says that service learning motivated him to take an interest in school and gave him a sense that he can make choices to counter stereotypes and shape the kind of person he wants to be. "I learned that school can't be boring if I make the right choices," Messam says.

Junod has led service learning projects for five years and believes that they have increased student attendance and motivation. She gets a 75 percent return rate on homework; it used to be 25 percent. Students now stay after school to complete work, and she also has much more parent contact.

"The hope is that those skills and positive attitude will carry into high school" and help lower the dropout rate, Junod explains.

Holdsman points out that other projects might focus strictly on the math and science of clean air, water, or land in urban neighborhoods—activities that teach environmental stewardship and avoid the social justice issues altogether. But he would like to see such projects also take the next step toward advocacy.

Holdsman says that in future professional development, Philadelphia's teachers will focus on integrating social advocacy and social change into service learning. He insists,

Cities have the hard, pressing issues of the day. We need to seize on the authentic setting in which we live for service learning to reach its fullest potential.

The Challenges

A review of service learning research (Billig, 2000) shows that the approach yields at least four benefits to students: academic learning, civic responsibility, personal and social development, and opportunities for career exploration.

But what makes a service learning project worthwhile? A recent report from the National Commission on Service Learning and Fiske (2002) re-affirms that a good service learning project has strong ties to academic content, meets a real community need, and involves students in the project's design, implementation, and evaluation.

One of the challenges of service learning is integrating its goals into both the academic curriculum and the community's needs. Although many schools and districts have exemplary programs that meet these criteria, the academic rigor and degree of civic involvement of service learning projects vary from district to district, say experts. "In some districts, a student can get service learning credit for doing a walkathon. To me that's pretty empty," says Kahne.

"It's hard to find consistent, long-term, high-quality service learning," says Sarah Pearson of the American Youth Policy Forum in Washington, D.C. Pearson's recent report, *Finding Common Ground: Service Learning and Education Reform* (2002), establishes the compatibility between the goals of comprehensive school reform models and those of service learning. Such programs as Paideia, Microsociety, and the Coalition of Essential Schools already use project-based and hands-on learning, embrace alternative assessments, and encourage students to apply their knowledge to real-life problems. These proven innovations create an "incredible opportunity" for exploring stronger ties between school reform and the creation of quality service learning programs, argues Pearson.

But such potential marriages, like service learning itself, need the strong support of administrators and teachers. Connecting to the school's community requires a cohesive, schoolwide vision of what service learning should do. As Billig points out, schools can't have just one or two teachers doing service learning. "They need to have a critical mass of teachers involved, which contributes to sustainability," she says. "Service learning can't be done by the

Lone Ranger.”

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