

QUALITY COMMUNITY SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECTS: GETTING STARTED

Rahima C. Wade, Ed.D.

What is Community Service-Learning?

Service-learning is a teaching method in which students learn valuable academic, social, and personal skills while meeting important needs in the school or local community. Where community service tends to be an elective, a club activity, or a one-time visit to a soup kitchen or nursing home, service-learning is integrated with the academic curriculum. Service-learning might involve students analyzing and cleaning up a polluted stream as part of their science curriculum or conducting an oral history with a senior citizen as part of learning social studies content and language arts skills. A variety of student outcomes can result from the combination of service, related academic instruction, and reflection on the service, learning, and larger social and political issues. These include personal development (increased self-esteem, internal locus of control); social development (group work skills, social sensitivity); values development (civic responsibility); academic development (basic academic skills, subject matter knowledge); and career development (career exploration and job-related skills).

Core Elements of Service-Learning

Service-learning projects should:

1. Address real community needs.
2. Incorporate the input of students, teacher, and community agencies.
3. Articulate clear service and learning goals.
4. Integrate service with academic skills and content.
5. Clarify the responsibilities of all those involved.
6. Provide opportunities for young people to engage in critical thinking, creative problem solving, and decision making.
7. Foster the development of responsibility and empathy.
8. Be inclusive of participants and contributions from many cultures.
9. Provide opportunities to reflect on the service, one's role in serving, and the larger societal issues involved.
10. be developmentally appropriate for students.
11. Focus on student initiative and active involvement.
12. Emphasize team work and collaboration.

Key Points and Questions to Consider when Planning Service-Learning Activities

1. Successful projects are valuable for students and the community.

- Is the project meeting important community needs?
- Are students learning valuable academic and social skills?
- Are students reflecting on their service involvement and the larger social and political issues involved?

2. Successful projects involved shared ownership between the teacher, the students, and the community.

- Do the students have input into the design of the project?
- Are community agencies involved in identifying the need for this project and assisting in its completion?
- Is the project one that I, as the teacher, feel excited about and capable of carrying out?

3. Successful projects are carefully planned and executed.

- Does the project consider what we know about service-learning?
- Does the project build upon existing service-learning curricula rather than "reinventing the wheel"?
- Have clear goals and objectives for student learning and service been identified?
- Have training, supervision, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning objectives been included in the plan?
- Have the responsibilities of all people involved been clarified?
- Have other key individuals (parents, principal) been informed about the service-learning project?

"Nuts and Bolts" — Some "How to's" on Service-Learning

Setting the Stage

It is unlikely that your students will be familiar with the term "service-learning." Introduce them to this concept and give some age-appropriate examples of what other students have done to benefit their schools and communities. Be sure to emphasize the "learning" as including both reflection on the service and integration with academic skills and content.

Information Gathering/Exploring the Problem

If possible, involve students and community members at this stage. What interests or concerns do your students have about their school or community? What special skills or talent do they have to offer? Students can engage in research by talking to community agencies, listening to guest speakers, doing library research, or perusing the local newspapers. Ask students to think about what kinds of service projects they would enjoy that would also meet important community needs and help them accomplish learning course skills or content. Students can conduct a survey in the school, at home, or in their neighborhoods about community needs. Send a letter home to parents inviting their input.

Brainstorming an Idea

Successful service-learning activities require thoughtful planning. Think about your own parameters for the project before beginning. How much time do you want to spend on service-learning? What resources do you have available to you? Are there skills or content in your curriculum that you want to integrate with service-learning? Before brainstorming project ideas with the students, be clear with them about your parameters for the project in terms of location, time, budget, scheduling, commitment, and curriculum objectives. As students come up with project ideas, record all possibilities. Then use your list of parameters as one means for evaluating the best choices.

Choosing a Project

It is important for both the students and teacher to have ownership of and enthusiasm for the project. Try to select a project that is workable and interesting to all involved. If you are willing, you might want to work on two projects and give students a choice as to which one they want to be involved with. Make sure before selecting a project that you will be able to tie it to your curriculum goals and objectives.

Planning

Begin the planning process by filling out the "Service-Learning Teacher Action Plan" in this packet. It is important to integrate service-learning with your academic curriculum. These questions will help you think about curriculum integration. Could students teach what they have learned to others? Could students' learning be presented as a product or performance to others? Could students' learning be applied to help solve a problem in the school or community? Look at the objectives and learner outcomes in your curriculum and set specific goals and objectives for the service-learning activities.

Establish a time-line for the service-learning project, including specific dates for the service project and reflection. How will you evaluate student learning? Think about ways students can be reflective about their service and learning throughout the project. Opportunities for reflection include: discussions, journal writing, and public speaking, writing a paper, or creating a special art project. Encourage students to reflect on what they are learning about themselves, service, and the issue under study.

Think about who could help with carrying out your service-learning activities. Possibilities include your school volunteer coordinator, community agency members, parents, other school personnel, and university students. Engendering support from others early on can make your job easier and also contribute to a more collaborative experience. Inform parents and your school principal about the project and obtain any needed permission forms for participation. Think about what supplies or transportation needs you will have. Do you have the funds to cover these costs? If not, how will you raise additional funds?

Take the time to go over your plans with another teacher who has done service-learning with students. You can both engage in some "trouble-shooting" by looking at your plans and talking about what problems might arise through the course of the project. Also, compare your plans with the checklist on the last page of this pamphlet.

Sequence of Activities

At this point you are ready to begin your service-learning activities! You might want to make a more detailed list of the sequence of activities both for planning purposes and to have a record of what you did. These plans will also be helpful in communicating with students, parents, other school personnel, and community members about the project.

Evaluation, Reflection, and Celebrations

Although evaluation and reflection should be ongoing throughout the project, you may want to more formally assess students learning when the project is finished. In addition, students will enjoy participating in a "celebration" upon the successful completion of the project. This might involve student awards or certificates, playing a game outside, or having a special snack in the classroom.

Service-Learning Teacher Action Plan

Give a general description of the ways you will try to combine service and learning in your classroom.

Give your rationale for using service-learning to enhance the instructional program.

What are the specific learner outcomes in your subject area(s) that students will learn through their service work?

List organizational strategies you will use in the school and with community members to ensure service-learning will be successful.

How will you prepare students so that they will have the necessary skills and information to do the service work?

What steps will you take to involve students in the planning and implementation so that they are committed and so that the service will be meaningful?

What activities have you planned to encourage individual and group reflection so that participants learn from the service experience?

How will you celebrate with students the successful completion of the project?

Evaluation of the project goals and objectives will be accomplished in what ways?

Service-Learning Planning Checklist

Make sure your service-learning plan includes the following:

- An important community need
- Input from students
- Input from community members
- Integration with the academic curriculum
- Clear service and learning goals
- Integration of service with academic skills and content
- Clarification of the responsibilities of all those involved
- Opportunities for young people to engage in critical thinking, creative problem solving, and decision making
- Opportunities to develop responsibility and empathy
- Participants and contributions from many cultures
- Opportunities to reflect on the service, one's role in serving, and the larger societal issues involved
- Developmentally appropriate activities for students
- Student initiative and active involvement
- Team work and collaboration
- Assistance from others
- A timeline including plans for evaluation of student learning
- A list of needed materials, supplies, or transportation