

2008

Best Practices in Service Learning

A Guide for Educators and Youth Workers



TNT
Intercultural
& Leadership
Development

What is Service Learning?

What is service learning? “The National Community Service Act of 1990 defined service learning as a process whereby students learn and develop through active participation in organized service experiences that actually meet community needs” (as cited by Champion, 1999, ¶16). The benefits to youth participating in service learning come from the experiential nature of community projects (Champion 1999; Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000). Service learning provides youth a forum to practice the skills they have learned from school or other organizational experiences. Burns (1998) states that service learning “enhances teaching by extending student learning into the community and helps foster a sense of caring” (as cited in Champion, 1999, ¶16).

The research of Weah, Simmons, & Hall, (2000) found that youth participate in service learning because they “feel personal satisfaction” and want “to improve their community, and to improve society as a whole” (p. 673). These findings are consistent with the research done by Howard (1993) and Woehrle (1993), who emphasize the personal growth youth experience as they gain a deeper understanding of the diverse needs within their own community and experience the positive feelings of serving others (pp. 42-43). Woehrle (1993) writes “Students come to realize that they, the servers, benefit as much as or more than those they are serving” (p. 42).

Surveys done by the National Service Learning Initiative, the National Youth leadership Council, the Kellogg Foundation and the Dewitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund indicate service

learning has a positive impact on youth (Champion, 1999). The benefits included a greater understanding about issues, improved critical thinking and problem solving rather than a particular increase in their academic skills (¶15). A majority of the research cited was on the immediate feedback of youth participants, whereas the research on long term impacts of service learning on behavior and attitudes was limited (Champion, 1999, ¶ 13-14).

Champion (1999) has narrowed the benefits of service learning for youth into four key areas: an increase of self-esteem; a sense of empowerment by participating in community service where they are needed, valued, and respected; improved citizenship as a result of active engagement in community life; and a heightening the student's desire to learn through their experience (¶17-18). Additionally, service learning promoted: a heightened sense of personal and social responsibility; more positive attitudes towards adults; more active exploration of careers; enhanced self-esteem; growth in moral ego development; more complex pattern of thoughts; and greater mastery of skills and content (Champion, 1993, ¶ 17). Therefore, the benefits to youth participation in service learning open the door for advanced learning, leadership development, and an increased awareness of self and others.

How does service learning differ from volunteering? Research asserts that "Frequently youth are involved as relatively uninformed volunteers, providing labor but not leadership. But there are also occasions when they are the leaders, working with adults to create sophisticated strategies for achieving significant, sustainable results" (Tolman & Pittman, 2001, p. 7).

Researchers at the Youth Leadership Institute have found:

the most effective way to work with young people was to see them as experts in their own experiences, as members of the community with an important perspective and a

right to share it, and as energetic and innovative resources to each other and to adults in their communities (Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005, p. 112).

Educators and youth workers are uniquely positioned to support and empower students to lead community change.

Two myths impacting youth leadership in community change are that “Young people lack the motivation to become involved” and “Young people lack the skills needed to handle the “serious” issues of power and politics or make significant differences through their work” (Tolman & Pittman, 2001, pp. 7-8). In fact, research finds that “this generation is not seeking to distance itself from community, but is instead looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues surrounding them” (Tolman & Pittman, 2001, p. 7). A survey done in 1998 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for Do Something (as cited by Tolman & Pittman, 2001) found 73% of young people ages 15-29 believe that they can have a big or moderate impact on making their community a better place to live (p. 8). This survey also suggested that youth perceive their participation in community change “as more authentic and rewarding than do adults” (p. 9). Based upon these facts, today’s students are poised to maximize the opportunity to contribute to their community.

There are various models for youth and adults to approach community change through service learning. This guide offers a four-step approach based upon the best practices within the field, in addition to suggestions for effective youth and adult collaboration.

References

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Best Practices in Service Learning: A Four-step Approach

Service learning is defined as youth engaged in community service, civic engagement and social activism for the purpose of learning

This guide offers best practices in service learning, with a four-step approach to developing youth-driven sustainable community based projects in your ministry. Based upon best practices from educators and experts in service learning this approach has been designed to help youth leaders support youth in developing sustainable community projects.

Step 1: Building the Relationship

- Identify the partnering organization
- Meet with the appropriate stakeholders to determine their needs
- Build and develop a reciprocal relationship

To establish a sustainable partnership with a community organization it is important for youth to develop a relationship with its stakeholders in the early developmental phases of a project.

The youth alone cannot determine the needs of the community they want to serve. The project must not only be an opportunity for the youth but also meet a need in the community. It is critical to empowering everyone involved that the partnering organization is involved in assessing their needs to determine the goals of the project.



The needs assessment creates a base and target for action. All Stakeholders should be involved in the assessment process which could include techniques such as asset mapping, focus group, survey or interviews.

A project that excludes the stakeholders in the early phases of development is not sustainable.

Step 2: Goals, Roles and Outcomes

Establish

- Project outcomes: What do all stakeholders want to achieve through this project?
- Roles and responsibilities: Who will do what and when?



- Skills the youth expect to gain through the project: What do the youth want to learn?

This pre-planning is an opportunity for the youth to **develop a vision and plan** that includes the voices of all key stakeholders to ensure a project that everyone can buy into. This extensive preparation will also help facilitate the next phase of the project, taking action.

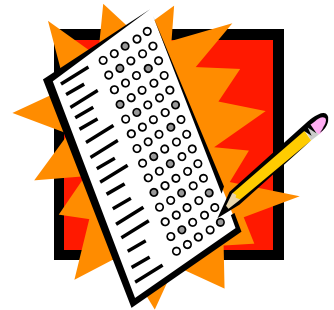
Step 3: Taking Action

Now that the goals, roles and outcomes are, it is time to put the plans into action. Project management and youth-adult collaboration become critical elements in the taking action phase (see pages 11 and 12). This will be an opportunity for everyone to learn new skills and hone existing ones. Youth will require support and flexibility from adults as they may struggle with group dynamics, meeting deadlines, and maintaining regular communications with stakeholders.

It is important to provide ongoing assessment of the plans and project once it has gotten started. This:

- Ensures the quality and effectiveness of a project and
- Allows the youth to address any necessary changes

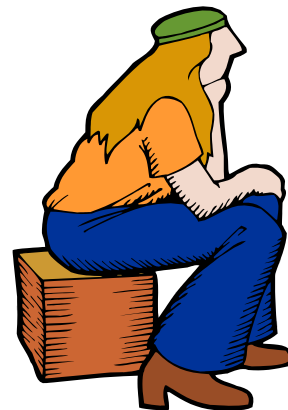
The youth can ensure that their plans originally set continue to be suitable, the goals and outcomes are being met effectively, and any needed changes can occur.



Step 4: Ending Thoughtfully

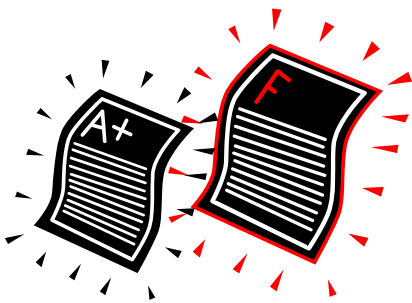
Upon completion of project, there must be:

- Reflection by participants
- Evaluation of project outcome and learning
- Individual recognition
- Public recognition for the stakeholders



Reflection

Reflection plays a key role in the learning and development of the youth. It offers youth the opportunity to more deeply examine their role in the community, the needs of it, and the role they play in addressing those needs. Youth should be encouraged to express these reflections through all phases of the project, but particularly in the end. Youth can record their reflections by journaling, written or photo; offering an oral presentation; writing an article for a community newspaper or the organizations newsletter; other artistic expressions such as a painting, collage, poem, song, etc; or a more traditional written summary or report.



Evaluation

The sustainability of the project and relationship with the partnering organization require an evaluation of the project outcomes and vision. It will also be important for youth leaders to evaluate the learning outcomes and skill development of the youth. The leadership and management skills that youth exercise in this activity should not be overlooked but recognized and acknowledged.

Recognition

Recognition validates everyone's contributions and increases awareness in the community. This could be a celebration, media coverage, or an award or certificate ceremony. Use your imagination to create an event and activity that acknowledges the work everyone has done.



Project Management Tips

Coordinating a service learning project requires Project Management skills that youth may or may not have. Youth leaders should discuss Project Management with the youth in the early phases of the project. Project management is an invaluable set of skills that youth will be able to develop through service learning.

What is a project?

A project is a temporary endeavor undertaken to create unique product, service or result.

What is Project Management?

1. Identify project requests between partnering organizations.
2. Establish clear goals and objectives for the project.
3. Balance demands for project quality, scope, time and cost.
4. Adapt specifications as needed throughout phases of the project.

Why Project Management?

1. Quality maintenance- high quality projects must be within the cost/budget, scope, and on time.
2. Reduce risk of failure; be able to respond to uncertainty.
3. Sustainability!

Which skills needed for successful Project Management?

- Interpersonal: communication, influence, leadership, motivation, negotiation, conflict management, project/problem solving
- General management skills: finance, contracts, communications, forms, letters
- Knowledge about the project topic or issue. Bring in an expert to discuss the topic or have youth do research.

Youth-Adult Collaboration

To increase youth participation and develop more supportive youth-adult partnerships in community-based projects youth leaders should take a **youth-driven approach**. Adults play a supporting role by monitoring the progress of the project, while youth take the lead.

Results of this approach with the youth include but are not limited to the development of:

- Leadership and essential administrative skills
- Advanced critical thinking
- Greater connection to the issue the project is addressing
- Sense or feeling of responsibility for the outcome of the project

A youth-driven approach is most successful when:

- Youth and adults enter into a collaborative effort as equal participants. It may be a struggle for some adults to work with youth or students from a place of equity. Be patient and flexible.
- Adults **MUST** resist “taking over” while the youth adjust to taking the lead.
- Both youth and adults must learn to work together. This is key to the success of any project.

Effective collaboration of youth and adults can result in:

- Better decision making
- Full engagement of youth
- Positive impact on the recipients of a project by exemplifying intergenerational partnerships
- Understanding the project environment: cultural and social; international and political; physical (outdoors, office, etc)
- Intergenerational understanding with respect and mutual trust
- Open doors for youth voices in the community and their influence in their community’s institutions and policies.

To read more on Service Learning and Youth Leadership Development purchase *Youth Learning*



About Tamara Thorpe

Tamara Thorpe is an Intercultural and Leadership trainer, coach and consultant in Victoria, B.C. She specializes in bringing a global vision to non-profit organizations and educational institutions. With more than twelve years experience in the field of international education and cultural awareness training, she offers an expertise in communicating across cultures and working effectively in a diverse community. Her real-life experience living and working in international and multi-cultural contexts has become a benefit to others as they seek to increase their intercultural competence. Tamara established TNT Intercultural and Leadership Development after completing her Master of Arts Degree in Leadership and Training from Royal Roads University.

from the World, Leading in their Communities: Creating Global Leaders for Tomorrow by Tamara Thorpe available at multiple online book sellers including www.amazon.com

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