SERVICE LEARNING

A variety of innovative experiential learning approaches are known to enhance the educational experience of young adults in America. One approach in particular, Service learning, has been increasingly popular among youth, including and especially those attending American educational institutions - from elementary schools to colleges (Lundy, 2007). While varying definitions of service learning are currently found within the literature, three common themes are repeatedly used to define it - First, the experience involves a reciprocal relationship that meets an identified need within the community; second, academic content is integrated into the service experience; third, participants are encouraged to reflect and connect the experience and content to their personal perspectives (Novak, Murray & Scheuermann, 2009).

This technique is also integrated into the academic courses across many disciplines as a teaching and learning strategy wherein students learn important curricular objectives by providing service that meets authentic community needs (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005). It refers to a method under which students apply particular course concepts to real-life situations (Simons & Cleary, 2006). Service learning places teaching and learning in a social context, facilitating socially responsive knowledge (Conway, Amel & Gerwien, 2009). Effective service-learning is integrated into the curriculum, involves cognitively challenging reflection activities, incorporates students’ voices in decision making, fosters diversity, includes monitoring of progress, has a significant duration, develops reciprocal partnerships with community organizations, and requires students to participate in meaningful service (Weah, 2007).

Research on the beneficial effects of service learning has been accumulated over the years. This includes studies of impacts of service learning experiences among middle school students. Middle school students struggle with significant issues unique to early adolescence involving physical, psychological, and social changes. They have been characterized by their need to (a) explore a variety of interests; (b) connect learning to practical life and work; (c) release energy through activity coupled with frequent fatigue due to rapid growth; (d) develop personal identity found through peers’ affirmation; (e) separate self from parents; and (f) rely on friends to provide comfort, understanding, and approval (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], n.d.). Stott and Jackson (2005) state that one pedagogical method that middle school counselors can use is service learning since it gives middle school students an opportunity to apply what they are learning in the classroom by performing acts of service that benefit the community. Their research found that middle school students who participated in service-learning activities demonstrated measurable increases in personal/social development, civic responsibility, academic learning, and career development.

Another study by Simons and Cleary (2006) conducted quantitative surveys to measure changes in students’ personal and interpersonal development, academic learning and civic. They also used qualitative research methods to explore the processes linked with students’ reduced stereotyping and increased community involvement. This was one of the first studies to use an exploratory methods design to demonstrate that participation in service learning affects academic learning and personal and social development. Their study showed that service learners increase their political awareness, diversity attitudes, civic engagement, community self-efficacy, and affiliation preferences for community involvement. Almost all the respondents (96%) reported
academic learning as a benefit of service learning, career development was as a second benefit, consistent with previous research that suggests service learning is a vehicle for confirming and modifying students’ career decisions. Almost all (97%) of the coded data identified self-efficacy or self-knowledge as a third service learning benefit and personal development as a fourth benefit of service learning.

In their research, Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty (2006) state the problems facing American K-12 education have been well documented that that programs proposing to solve these problems are numerous and varied. They make an argument that even though there is no shortage of studies that suggest that a variety of strategies independently improves the academic performance and social behavior of students, there is a lack of scholarly research that examines the combined effects of strategies. For this reason, their study focused on two of the most widely used strategies in American K-12 education – service learning and after-school programs.

Preliminary results of this study based on information of six hundred students who participated in the after-school programs at four elementary schools suggested that students participating in the service learning component of the after-school program had greater improvement in their grade point averages and conduct grades and were less likely to be suspended than students who did not participate in the service-learning component (Tannenbaum & Brown-Welty, 2006).

Scales and Roehlkepartain (2004) reported on a longitudinal study that more validly suggests the contribution that service might make to higher grades. They found that consistent or "emerging" volunteers (those who started volunteering in grades 7 to 9 rather than in grades 6 to 8) had significantly higher grade point averages (GPAs) in high school than those who never volunteered or "faded" in their volunteering (served in grades 6 to 8 but not afterward).

Another large-scale study conducted to assess the relationship between high school students’ participation in community service and performance in mathematics, reading, history, and science using student panel data from 1988-2000 National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) showed positive although limited effects in subject-matter achievement from participating in service learning (Davila and Mora 2007). Although this study concluded that students’ engagement in community service was related to positive but small gains in scholastic achievement in mathematics, science, and history, no statistically significant relationship was found between community service participation and students’ reading development. Furco (2010), however, has referred to a number of other well-designed studies significant improvements in reading and language arts among service learning participants when compared to similar students not engaged in service learning in his research on the value of service learning.

Service learning has also been found to be an effective method to deal with the drop-out rates among youths in the country. Duckenfield and Drew (2006) conclude that the service leaning is one of the best research-based dropout prevention strategies including other strategies such as school/community collaboration, family engagement and early literacy development. Another survey of 807 high school students between the ages of 14 and 18 to study whether service-learning can play a major role in keeping students engaged in school and on track to graduate by addressing some of the principle causes of dropping out (Bridgeland et. al. 2008). While the teachers who participated in the focus groups said that they could not numerically
show that service-learning had prevented students from dropping out of school, they did agree that it could have a positive effect on graduation rates.

Service-learning has tremendous potential in the lives of marginalized youth—those who typically do not participate in community activities, sometimes described as vulnerable, disadvantaged, or at-risk youth, as per the research of Scales et. al. (2006). Their research found that service-learning may be an especially valued strategy for student engagement and achievement for principals in schools that are urban, or majority nonwhite, or high poverty. Kahne and Sporte (2008) studied the effects of family, neighborhood, and school characteristics, as well as exposure to best practices in civic education and service learning, on the development of commitment to civic participation among Chicago high school students, the majority of whom were low-income and minority students. Results showed that service learning and exposure to effective strategies for civic education were the strongest predictors of commitment to civic participation, having markedly stronger effects than school, neighborhood, or family factors.

Billig, Root & Jesse’s (2005) study examined the impact of participation in service-learning on high school students’ attitudes toward school and civic development. Using a national sample of classrooms of students that participated in service-learning matched with classrooms of students of similar demographic and achievement background that did not participate in service-learning, the study investigated the effect of service-learning participation on students' academic engagement, valuing school, attachment to school, and civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and activities. Their results showed that although service-learning students scored higher than comparison students on several outcomes, most differences were not statistically significant. Service-learning students had significantly higher scores on enjoyment of school overall than comparison group peers. No differences were found in enjoyment of specific content areas. Service-learning students were significantly more likely than comparison group members to report that they intended to vote.

In another quasi-experimental study, Billig et.al. (2008) assessed pre-post changes in values development among 840 middle and secondary school students over a three-year period. Students who participated in service learning character education programs had significantly less diminution in value attainment, which suggests that service learning may help students retain their character assets as they mature. One of the most important sources of variation in students’ experience with service learning and service learning effects was the quality of implementation. Not all service learning were considered equal which has led researchers and practitioners to seek and identify elements that are fundamental to high-quality service learning practice, resulting in the K-12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice (Billig and Weah 2008).

Novak, Markey, and Allen (2007) conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the cognitive outcomes of service-learning in higher education. They examined nine studies and found an overall positive relationship between service-learning and learning outcomes. However, there were some limitations to this study. One, it only included published data and two, it didn’t take into consideration self-reported learning. Warren (2012) conducted another meta-analysis to reduce these two gaps. This study focused on further clarifying the relationship between service-learning and student learning outcomes by considering unpublished literature and distinguishing between self-reported and concrete measures of learning such as exams and other assignment
scores. This meta-analysis examined studies comparing service-learning and non-service learning students’ learning outcomes. The results once again suggested that service-learning has a positive effect on student learning outcomes.

Billig, Root and Jesse (2005) suggest that SL in young adults has demonstrated increase in self-esteem and self-concept, more highly internalized moral standards, more positive attitudes toward school and education, greater interest in, commitment to, and sensitivity toward their communities and their needs, and stronger beliefs that one can make a difference in the world. These are qualities that employers generally look for in job seekers. A study by Lester et.al. (2005) found that campus recruiters who worked for companies that promote corporate social responsibility as a key part of their overall mission were more inclined to see the value of job applicants with service learning experiences.

Service learning and Volunteerism are being increasingly used as interchangeable terms. Service-learning programs are distinguished from other forms of experiential learning (i.e., community service, volunteering) by their intention to benefit students and recipients of service equally (Sigmon & Pelletier 1996; Simons & Cleary, 2006). According to Furor (2010), volunteerism is the engagement of students in activities where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient. Although the participants-volunteers may receive some benefits from the experience (e.g., feeling pleased with themselves) as well as learn something in the process, these outcomes are clearly serendipitous and unintentional. Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring. To do this, service-learning programs must have some academic context and be designed in such a way that ensures that both the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service. If we take this distinction into account, volunteerism and service learning are different.

Tomkovick et. al. (2008) attempted to see if the learning enhanced the service by studying the implications of the learning experience of service learning participants on future volunteerism. Their study found that past volunteerism was the most powerful determinant of future volunteerism behavior. Even though service learning programs foster a higher level of future volunteerism, one must not discount the individual’s previous experience with volunteer activities. Service-learning differs from generic community service in that it has specific academic goals, is organized through schools, and involves reflection activities for the participants (Bridgeland et. al. 2008). In addition to this, compensation also plays a role in the distinction - some participants receive direct economic rewards and others do not, thus not all service learning is and can be considered pure volunteerism and vice versa. (Tomkovick et.al, 2008).

One of service learning’s biggest limitations, admittedly, is that it induces students to ask only, “How can we help these people?” instead of the harder question, “Why are conditions this way?” (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). While Simons and Cleary’s (2006) study found several beneficial impacts of service learning, the same study also found that the service learners
decrease their interests in the course and field and social competence from the beginning to the end of the course.

Reference:


