

Preface

Can you remember an exceptionally good day from your own school experience? Is there at least one day that you will always remember? What was it about that day that was so special? I am willing to guess that it was a day when you accomplished something very important. Maybe someone important, like a teacher, asked you to do something for her or him, or for someone else, and you felt special because that teacher thought of you. It was then that you most likely knew that you really mattered. Or maybe someone, like a classmate, noticed that you were really good at something. Isn't it amazing that after all these years memories like that are so fresh? That is because people often forget what we say and do, but they never forget how we make them feel (Carerra, 1999). Can you imagine leaving school without ever having had an exceptionally good and memorable experience? I wonder how many kids do leave without such an experience. All kids, from those who graduate with honors to those who struggle to graduate, need to leave school with empowering memories. Service-learning is a teaching strategy that can give kids exceptionally good and memorable experiences, among many other positive things.

WHO IS THIS BOOK WRITTEN FOR? ■

This book is written for the teachers and other educators who believe that their students deserve learning experiences that motivate and engage them, as well as prepare them for their future role as citizens. It is for educators who know that when they are talking about the art of teaching, one size does not fit all. It is for educators who are ready to try something different but not necessarily new, since service-learning has its roots in the educational philosophy of John Dewey. While Dewey (1916) did not advocate for service-learning by name, he did believe that education ought to be experiential and related to citizenship.

Service-learning has been described by various authors and organizations in many different ways. This book will clarify what service-learning is, what it does for *all* students, and how teachers and other educators can get started with it in their own schools and classrooms. Chapter 1 discusses the benefits of service-learning for all students, and Chapter 2 assists the reader in understanding the research documenting those benefits from a practical point of view. Chapter 3 helps readers see that infusing the Essential Elements of Effective Service-Learning into existing projects is very doable. Chapter 4 provides the basics of laying the groundwork for getting started with service-learning, and Chapter 5

offers specific examples of team-building and reflection activities, two key features of quality service-learning projects. Chapters 6 and 7 provide ideas for service-learning projects, along with specifics on how to adapt them for specific situations. Chapter 8 discusses sustaining service-learning once it is begun, and Chapter 9 wraps things up.

■ WHY DID I WRITE THIS BOOK?

For the past 16 years, I have been honored to supervise a program in which skilled teachers and counselors assist struggling students in developing interpersonal competencies, emotional literacy, and academic success. In addition to this supervisory role, I have also provided staff development for teachers and other educators on issues affecting all students, including “at risk” students. As a result of this work, there have been numerous opportunities for me to note that many caring professionals struggle to remain positive and hopeful about students who seem to resist all efforts to engage them in learning and growing. These educators often feel overwhelmed and discouraged because they just cannot seem to reach their most challenging students, some of which are the brightest. They see potential being lost and it concerns them. Teachers and counselors ask for advice on what to do, what actions to take that might make a difference. I tell them that service-learning, when it is used appropriately, offers an option that often works when other strategies have not.

I decided to write this book to help teachers, and, in so doing, to help the students who may not be thriving in our educational system. Too many students go through school getting good grades but not developing the skills necessary for successful citizenship. Too many students drop out of school. Too many students who stay in school do not feel challenged, connected, or cared for. This book is for all teachers who want to make their course content more meaningful to all of their students. It is for teachers who know that they may not be engaging all of their students and who want to do something about that.

The examples of service-learning projects that are described in Chapters 6 and 7 are predominately geared toward a K–8 population, but they could be adapted to higher grade levels. While service-learning is a wonderful strategy for the hard-to-engage student, it is powerful for *all* students because it directly connects their course content to the real world, making what they learn in school meaningful and useful. Therefore, this book ought to be a helpful guide for all educators interested in connecting their students to learning through service.

■ WHY SERVICE-LEARNING?

In addition to producing graduates who go on to the world of work or higher education, the K–12 educational system ought to produce students who are competent and caring citizens. Service-learning engages students in learning about their communities, participating in active citizenship, and developing their personal social-emotional attributes.

I first observed the positive effects of service-learning when inner-city counselors in the program that I supervise began taking the most difficult, apparently unmotivated elementary students to a local nursing home to interact with the elderly. The transformation that took place within these students was remarkable. They began looking forward to school and participating more. The connection with the elderly, as well as with the caring adult who implemented the program, was magical. The students demonstrated that their behavior was totally under their control. Kids with problem behaviors in the classroom suddenly became polite, interested, and considerate. Their teachers reacted with amazement as the students who gave them the most trouble in the classroom transformed themselves at the community site.

WHEN IS IT BEST TO START SERVICE-LEARNING? ■

You may wonder why it is important that the elementary students I just described had the transformational experience of service-learning when it is high school kids who are dropping out. You might think that high school students need experiences like this more than elementary students do. The truth is that kids begin “dropping out” by disengaging from their learning early in their careers, some by fourth grade. Some may disengage because of boredom, others may disengage because of academic failure, and still others may disengage because they have little support from their families. By middle school it can be too late to engage students who are struggling academically and/or behaviorally. Students may wait to drop out until they are 16, but their dropout process begins long before that. Service-learning is appropriate for all ages, and although it is never too late to start, the sooner that it is included as an educational strategy the better.

WHAT MAKES SERVICE-LEARNING GOOD INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY? ■

Service-learning encompasses all that we know about effective instruction and learning. The outcomes of service-learning, which would be difficult to attain through traditional classroom instruction, include students’ creating meaning in and a relationship to the real world, engaging multiple intelligences and learning styles, and developing character traits that will accompany them into their adult lives. Offering students choices and opportunities to make decisions, encouraging students to work as members of teams, and allowing students alternative ways to demonstrate learning are sound educational practices, all of which are inherent in service-learning.

The most effective service-learning occurs when students are involved in the planning and implementation of the projects. Students who take part in making decisions and devising solutions for problems are engaged in higher-order thinking. When students have meaningful roles in ensuring the success of a project, their teachers are able to assume the roles of coaches, facilitators, and advocates. They create and provide opportunities for students, and then help facilitate students’ working together to achieve their goals.

Service-learning was never meant to be the only means of instruction that a teacher utilizes. It is a teaching strategy that enhances subject matter, stimulates critical thinking, and promotes the personal development of students. It can make school better for good students, and it can make school better for marginal students.

This book provides sufficient background information and offers enough ideas for service projects for teachers to be able to adapt this amazing strategy to their own students' needs and interests. We look at various ways that service-learning is being implemented, and how it can engage students and inspire teachers. There are descriptions here of many activities that have been used as service-learning projects, and suggestions for teachers' incorporating them into their classroom instruction. Service-learning is not the only way to deliver curriculum and build personal competencies, but it is an effective one. I hope that this book will both inspire and convince you to do all in your power to begin incorporating this strategy, even in the simplest form. If you do, I believe that you will begin to see the kids before you as eager learners and resources just waiting to be tapped.

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