

When ‘service’ isn’t enough: Taking the next step for transformative service-learning

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Abstract

Service practice is reasonably well recognised in education, especially Christian education which seeks to emulate the example of Jesus. However, service-learning has emerged as a transformative educational practice that provides a framework and curriculum producing transformative positive outcomes for students that equip them for their role as future democratic citizens, and further as representatives of Jesus.

“We are all woven together in the great web of humanity, and whatever we can do to benefit and uplift others will reflect in blessing upon ourselves. The law of mutual dependence runs through all classes of society” (White, 1890, pp. 534-535).

Christian author Ellen White asserts an interconnection within all humanity. As educators, we build on that theme by making service an important aspect of school life. Engaging students in service outside the classroom is often valued by schools as a practice that builds character and community. Indeed, the research evidence is that high-quality service-learning programs in K-12 “affect students in multiple positive ways, primarily in the areas of personal-social development, academic achievement, citizenship, and career awareness”. (Billig, 2002)

Christian education has a particular affinity with service as a core value because it is part of the example and message of Jesus Christ. It would be difficult to find a Christian school that didn’t incorporate some form of service into its teaching practice, and most would agree that involving students in service to others is a good thing. But research in the area of service-learning suggests that service alone might not be producing the positive outcomes that schools are after.

Service-learning, identified as a transformative educational practice in the last 55 years, goes beyond just ‘doing service’ to being grounded in a deep learning experience that is facilitated by skilled teaching. There is a difference, and to achieve profound personal and academic transformations, that difference matters. The difference is not necessarily the activity that the student does, but rather what the educator facilitates for the student to ensure that service is meaningful, purposeful, and ethical. Importantly service-learning develops a reciprocal interaction with the entity or person receiving the service. Like everything modelled on the example of Jesus, service-learning is based on relationships.

It might be a bit like the difference between giving kids a ball to play with at recess, and coaching them in the skills needed to play as a team. With one, the activity is positive in itself. With the other, the learning acquired through the activity is designed and intentional. The team has a goal requiring initiative, strategy and planning; the coach guides players to understand and interpret how each contributes to the team goal; and reflection on performance is incisive and thorough.

Likewise, when we consider service-learning beyond just enacting a service activity, a similar framework for the service activity matters. What are the needs of those we serve, what do our students have to offer, and how will the individual or community reciprocate to develop a partner relationship with our students? Once we are clear on our purpose, how do we guide the deep, critical reflection that ensures positive outcomes?

We know that when service-learning is done well, the experience can be transformative. (Barton, T, 2020) The key to effective service-learning is not just in the activity but rather in giving

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meaning and structure to the activity through relational teaching. A skilled teacher with a good framework and curriculum can be the difference between just doing service and facilitating life-changing service-learning.

In this article we want to promote the value of service-learning practice and provide an evidence-based direction for those who want to be intentional in this area. Whether you are just contemplating service-learning, or are already well versed in what service-learning can achieve, we would like to encourage you to be even more intentional and focused on transformative outcomes in your own practice – and suggest you share your learning with others.

The research in service-learning is abundant and we will focus on summarising key issues in future issues of TEACH. If service is a passion for you and your school, then dig in with an open mind and see where God leads you and your students. There is much to learn, the rewards are great, and future articles will help you along the way. Education that changes lives is contagious.

Service-learning Brief Facts

What is Service-learning?

Although definitions of service-learning vary, common elements include the integration of community service with academic learning, the development of reciprocal relationships and guided critical reflection as a way to develop students' civic responsibility (Brandes & Randall, 2011). As noted by Bringle and Clayton (2012):

Despite variations, there is broad consensus that service learning involves the integration of academic material, relevant service activities, and critical reflection and is built on reciprocal partnerships that engage students, faculty/staff, and community members to achieve academic, civic, and personal learning objectives as well as to advance public purposes (p.105).

Short Answer: The integration of community service with structured learning.

*Note: A service activity, whether a local visit or an extended trip is **not** considered 'service-learning' without academic curriculum and purposeful engagement to achieve educational outcomes. The reason is that research shows that 'service-learning' achieves higher transformational outcomes for both students and communities than service alone and minimizes any chance*

of negative outcomes which can happen when all aspects of quality service-learning are not recognised or practiced.

How do you know if Service-learning is done well?

Not all service-learning produces great outcomes, hence the need for an evidence-based framework and curriculum. There is sufficient research in service-learning at a university level, and at secondary and primary levels to inform fundamental principles as a robust starting point.

Foundational to the research literature are the K-12 service-learning standards. Shelley Billig, who has led the research in K-12 service-learning identified eight standards of best practice for service-learning in secondary schools (Billig, 2007). The K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice were published by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC) and provide a set of standards designed to inform effective service-learning experiences for students (Billig, 2011). These standards provide a framework for the implementation of high-quality service-learning initiatives that foster student engagement, civic responsibility, and academic learning. If you are presently involved in delivering service or service-learning activities for students, a consideration of these standards will ensure quality approaches to your endeavours.

1. **Meaningful Service:** Focuses on service that is authentic, addresses a community need, and allows for student involvement in planning and implementation.
2. **Link to Curriculum:** Emphasizes the integration of service-learning into the academic curriculum, aligning service experiences with learning objectives and academic standards.
3. **Reflection:** Encourages deliberate reflection activities that help students process their service experiences, connect them to academic learning, and promote personal growth.
4. **Partnerships:** Highlights the importance of collaborative partnerships between schools and community organizations to create meaningful service opportunities.
5. **Student Voice and Choice:** Values student input, empowering them to have a say in selecting and designing service projects that resonate with their interests and the needs of the community.

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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

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6. **Diversity:** Promotes an inclusive approach that honours and respects diverse perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds within service-learning experiences.
7. **Progress Monitoring:** Advocates for ongoing assessment and evaluation of service projects to track progress, assess impact, and improve future initiatives.
8. **Duration and Intensity:** Stresses the importance of providing adequate time and depth for service experiences, allowing for meaningful engagement and a deeper impact on students and the community.

What can service-learning achieve for students?

Service-learning practitioners recognise that implementing service-learning curriculum is labour-intensive. Hence, they want to be sure that the outcomes warrant the time and emotional energy expended. Billig (2000), identified the impacts of service-learning in the following domains:

1. Service-learning has a positive effect on ... personal development...
2. Service-learning helps develop students' sense of civic and social responsibility and their citizenship skills.
3. Service-learning helps students acquire academic skills and knowledge.
4. Service-learning results in greater mutual respect between teachers and students.
5. Service-learning leads to more positive perceptions of schools and youths being reported by community members.

"When service-learning meets an authentic community need and includes meaningful planning, service, reflection, and celebration, it typically succeeds in engaging students in the learning task. Most studies attribute this outcome to the nature of service-learning as an activity that students perceive to be relevant, interesting, meaningful, and fun." (Billig, (2000) TEACH

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Jerry Unser is an educator whose career has focused on building character through service and adventure. In 1993 he developed Storm Co, a service-based approach to engaging students with rural and outback communities. He has continued his passion through 30 years of study and experience in immersive service-learning practice.

Carol-Joy Patrick developed an award-winning service-learning elective for Griffith University, winning both a Citation and Program Award in the national Australian Awards for University Teaching. The awards recognised the transformative personal and professional development in students participating in the course.

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