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-Curtis Ogden

Community service learning is recognized by many teachers, students, policy makers, youth workers, and community activists to be one of the most exciting educational and social initiatives sweeping this country. In this article the author describes the successes and challenges of ImPACT, a community-based service learning program, and how it may compare with and inform school-based programs.

For anyone who has had their ears tuned to the current discussions around school and social reform in this country, it should be no news that *community* and *service* are buzzwords. Fewer people may know about the growing service learning movement, which has engaged millions of K-12 and college students in service activity tied to their education.

Service Learning Overview

The antecedents to the current service movement are many and go back as far as the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s. The last 30 years have witnessed the birth of volunteer initiatives such as VISTA and the Peace Corps. In 1988, George Bush called for a new volunteer service movement, which he dubbed "A Thousand Points of Light." The National and Community Service Acts of 1990 and 1993 sought to create a nationwide service system to engage Americans of all ages in meaningful service to their

communities. This legislation was intended to renew the ethic of civic responsibility, create more volunteer opportunities, and remove barriers for citizens to involve themselves in increased volunteer activity [5]. An integral part of this was a push for service learning.

Service learning has been defined in numerous ways and through different forms of implementation. In general, however, service learning refers to both a kind of education and a philosophy. The kind of education it embodies is experiential and includes both action (service) and reflection (writing or thinking about the service performed). The pioneers of the service learning movement emphasized the need for practical application of academic skills in real life situations and in meeting actual community needs [1]. Service learning as a philosophy holds the ideals of community, citizenship, and democracy as goals for engagement. In a school-based setting, service learning is looked to as a revitalizing tool for curricula and young minds. According to Carol Kinsley, in her article "Community Service Learning as Pedagogy,"

"Many educators have noted that American youth are isolated and alienated from society and they recommend community service learning as part of their schooling as a way to reconnect youth and help them gain a sense of community." [4]

Community-based service learning is implemented by community agencies and organizations and shares many of the same goals.

As more schools and agencies embrace service learning, some practitioners (including myself) worry that it might lose its potential as a tool for social change.* In this article, along with

presenting ImPACT, I will also discuss how a youth-centered and holistic approach to service learning is effective in achieving profound individual and social transformation.

The Roots of ImPACT

In 1994, I returned to the United States having spent 18 months in southern Africa doing community and youth development work. While working with "street children" in Harare, Zimbabwe, I was introduced to an educational approach which built on the strengths of individuals and developed their consciousness of the world around them. I learned that many of the children on the streets of Harare had developed remarkable street-smarts, and were nothing like the helpless objects of charity that many people made them out to be. Most of these youth were very skilled, and our aim was to tap into their strengths.

We worked with these young people and their communities to identify problems in their lives and help them to come up with their own solutions. The empowering techniques I learned were inspired by the writings of the Brazilian popular educator, Paulo Freire, whose work validated disenfranchised people and helped them to take control of their own lives. One result of our efforts was a community school, which used local resources and designed its own curriculum to develop appropriate skills to meet real life needs.

Through this experience I began to look critically at my own education in the United States. Like many of my generational peers, I was alienated from my ability to be self-directed, or to analyze and act upon my world. This insight, along with lessons learned in Harare, inspired me to apply my experiences to youth work here at home. When I discovered The Learning Web in Ithaca, New

York, it was clear that I had found the right place to build on my vision.

The Learning Web was founded in 1972 as a project of the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy (CRESP) at Cornell University. Now independent, its mission is to provide young people, who may be disengaged from school and society, with experiential learning opportunities. The Learning Web apprenticeship program was designed to connect young people with adult mentors in the community for the purpose of learning about and interacting with their surroundings. Through a guided process of exploration, young people not only learn work skills, but also are empowered to be more self-directed and confident in their learning and lives. Essentially, it is the young participants who define each experience by expressing their interests and curiosities to staff, who then find an appropriate placement. This youth-centered approach carried over into the development of a service learning program in 1992. From 1994 until 1998 I was coordinator of this program, which came to be known as ImPACT (or the Importance of Participating, Acting, and Coming Together).

ImPACT Essentials

The Learning Web's philosophy meshed well with my vision of empowering young people to contribute to and change their community. But as I plunged into local high schools, to muster enthusiasm and participants, I discovered a potential source of student resistance: many young people were turned off by school and participation in their community because they lacked a voice in either setting. Furthermore, I repeatedly heard negative comments about education and community service, which were identified as boring, forced, and even forms of punishment.

When I asked the young people what might be done to change their feelings, many raised the issue of choice. They had little say in their classes and did not feel connected to their community. When community projects were assigned, they felt little personal investment. Very rarely were they asked for their thoughts and opinions; many felt they were treated as if they had nothing to offer.

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This is where ImPACT began: voice and choice. Our first goal was to redefine "participation" to include discussing feelings, thoughts, and experiences before carrying out a prescribed service learning project--thus making service work relevant to the experiences of the participants. I started off with two questions: "What does community service mean to you?" and "What is your ideal form of service?" There was always a vast array of different responses to these questions. As we discussed the reasons for the differences between people's choices, the youth raised issues of impact, intimacy, immediacy, and sustainability. They also identified emotional, cultural, moral, intellectual, and physical factors. I attempted to acknowledge all perspectives and experiences, hoping to increase student investment and set the stage for a youth-driven approach to service learning.

ImPACT ran as an extracurricular after-school program, which met twice a week for three hours over a five-month period. Students participated in the program as volunteers and, though they did not get course credit for their involvement, many used the experience to complete assignments for their classes or get extra credit. Part of my role was to keep participants' teachers informed of our activities in the event that an academic connection might be made. Each group numbered between 10 and 12 students. Overall, the program included the following five stages, which are discussed in the sections that follow:

1. Recruitment and introduction to service
2. Group building
3. Conducting community research
4. Selection and implementation of project (s)
5. Evaluation and celebration

Recruitment and introduction to service

Recruitment usually entailed classroom presentations or student assemblies and was followed by an informational meeting for interested students. During this meeting I showed a video presenting young people throughout the U.S. taking action in their communities. Because the video was produced by, for, and with teens, it appealed to the youth. Afterwards, discussion often led to comparisons between the communities and issues portrayed in the video and those of the viewers. This process helped students to identify issues that might be addressed by the new group, and began to make the program relevant to their lives.

Group building

Once a small group was formed, we proceeded with group building exercises, including

activities focusing on personal interests and skills. To further validate the youth, we explored such questions as: *What do you do well and how can you apply your talents to service work? What are you interested in and how can we channel these interests into our work?* These discussions were open-ended, and expanded the realm of possibilities for action.

Early on in the team-building process, I organized a project to give everyone "a taste of service" in the area of housing renovations. Facilitators introduced each new group to painting or basic maintenance work in low-income housing units. This experience became an opportunity for reflection, when we later discussed reactions to the project. Many youth enjoyed the experience because they liked working as a group, or they enjoyed painting or doing demolition work. Others were less enthusiastic, claiming that it was only "busy work," or that working for a couple of hours was not much of a contribution. In one case, a young woman raised the question of whether we might be doing free work for a deadbeat landlord. These discussions raised participants' awareness of the complexity of service work as well as potential considerations in the selection of future projects.

Conducting community research

The next step, community investigation, allowed participants to develop a meaningful context for their work and appreciation of the issues at play in their community. Various techniques, including observation exercises, walking tours, attending public events, skimming local newspapers, conducting "on the street" interviews, handing out surveys, talking to local historians and elders, and studying maps, contributed to the research initiative. Participants also became familiar

with "asset mapping"--i.e., identifying resources in the community such as social service agencies. Together, these initiatives helped to deepen our knowledge of the community and focus our efforts.

Selection and implementation of project(s)

After two or three weeks of research, the time arrived for the group to decide which project (s) it wished to pursue. Our goal was to achieve consensus, and the decision-making process focused on factors such as time, resources, impact, and feasibility. The number and nature of projects varied from group to group and from community to community. Some included joining ongoing initiatives; others were original undertakings. They ran the gamut from the political to the "warm and fuzzy." The list included:

- Lobbying for and establishing a youth chair on a local government committee
- Organizing a benefit concert for family social services
- Producing a magazine on ways youth can contribute to their community
- Restoring historic cemeteries and monuments
- Planting and cultivating a garden for a soup kitchen
- Doing trail work for state parks
- Removing graffiti from a playground
- Leading workshops with younger children about community service

The process of selection and implementation of projects also includes ongoing reflection on the part of both students and staff. As has been widely noted in the literature on service learning, reflection is key to growth through service experiences. ImPACT students thought, talked, and wrote about their experiences

throughout the program in a number of ways:

- Participating in discussion circles
- Keeping journals of their experiences
- Watching movies related to projects and discussing the relevance to their experiences
- Speaking with invited journalists about their experiences
- Writing newspaper articles
- Presenting to and sharing ideas with college service groups

The fact that ImPACT functioned in a group setting generated many informal and spontaneous opportunities for reflection. Often these moments occurred during car rides or walks to and from projects. The fashion in which these discussions developed contributed to the wide-ranging connections made between our work and the lives of the participants. Through this process the youth were encouraged to invest their full selves in the program and to look at service and those with whom they worked (or served) in a holistic light.

Evaluation and Celebration

By the end of the program cycle, each group developed many insights into the needs of their community which they were unable to address in our time together. In an effort to capture these insights, I used an evaluative process to not only rate and review our accomplishments, but also make recommendations for future work and projects in the community. Written and verbal evaluations also focused on ways in which the overall program could be improved. Some participants actually helped plan and give presentations for recruitment at other schools, which brought the process full circle.

I also worked with each group to plan a celebration of our accomplishments. Ultimately each group planned its own celebration, though I asked that it relate in some way to their service work. One group decided to hold a pot-luck dinner at an elementary school where it had done a project. We invited local community leaders, family, and friends, and presented a video tape of our efforts and handed out achievement awards to the participants. We also presented a list of recommended community changes to local officials.

I was always struck by the transformations that occurred in the participants and the community. Many adults were impressed by the accomplishments of the group and their desire to take action. City and town officials began to call on group members to offer their insights on community issues, a process that created new roles and confidence for many of the youth (see the sidebar "Reflections on the Learn and Service America Conference"). Perhaps more than anything else, however, ImPACT left participants with a sense of new possibilities. Community service was no longer drudgery or duty, but a very personal and meaningful undertaking.

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Sidebar 1:

Reflections on the Learn and Service America Conference...

Challenges in Facilitating ImPACT

One of the mixed blessings of ImPACT was that participants often wanted to continue their service work beyond our five months together. In fact, part of my vision in developing the program was to give youth the tools and motivation to organize projects on their own. But this process was not without its challenges, such as the following:

- ***Lack of leverage on the part of youth.*** In some instances I was able to work with the group to recruit a teacher, parent, or youth worker to serve as an advocate. Other groups attempted to go it alone, but without an adult representative, inevitably ran into obstacles such as lack of meeting space, transportation, and resources.
- ***Lack of time.*** The grant I received to run the program stipulated that I move around the county's six school districts in five-month periods. This truncated the time we had for developing skills and building momentum for independence.
- ***Lack of continuity.*** Throughout each year I organized a number of retreats and reunions, which brought current and older groups together to undertake big projects and share experiences. These were often powerful gatherings and seemed to provide some sense of

continuity for old participants, but they did not replace weekly meetings and ongoing projects. Obviously, this also speaks to the challenge of limited funding for community-based projects.

Community-Based Versus School-Based Service Learning Models

In fact, because of unfortunate funding priorities, the ImPACT program is now defunct. Over the years, emphasis from the program's funding source was placed on academic connections and ultimately moving toward a school-based program. The last year of the program, we obliged by teaching ImPACT as a class in an alternative school setting. Though the program functioned well, it was only a step toward locating the model more firmly within a school structure that would squash its community-based vitality. The funders viewed integration into the school curriculum as a more legitimate and effective educational enterprise. In my opinion, however, this attitude devalues the capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs) like the Learning Web to provide powerful learning and development opportunities for young people.

The act of absorbing ImPACT (and other programs like it) into school structures is risky business. Problems include serious limitations posed by accountability structures, state curriculum mandates, insurance regulations, scheduling, and faculty time. In addition, the introduction of service learning in many schools has become a carrot, to make classroom learning more interesting, rather than a tool for real social change. CBOs often occupy positions in their communities that give them a unique ability to guide young people in a more holistic manner [3]. This is not to invalidate school-based learning, but simply to point out the value of maintaining community-

based models. As one of my students said in response to the suggestion that ImPACT become part of school, "You should keep it separate because the community creates a wider spectrum to work in. I like the freedom."

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The psychologist Jerome Bruner once wrote that,

"Education must . . . be not only a process that transmits culture but also one that provides alternate views of the world and strengthens the will to explore them." [2]

This, in my mind, is what truly transformational education is all about. The power of ImPACT was that it encouraged young people to creatively invest their complete selves in the community. Students often criticize schools because they believe there is no place for their thoughts, ideas, and opinions. They do not feel whole or inspired to learn. This is a potential limitation for school-based service learning as well.

I hope that this presentation has indicated the importance of maintaining community-based service learning programs. However, I do

believe that there is room for partnerships between schools and CBOs to carry out the vision of the service learning pioneers. I also hope that across all learning environments there will be a stronger push to make service learning relevant to the lives and experiences of youth of all backgrounds, to encourage young people to ask difficult questions about their communities and society, and to maintain an awareness of life beyond the classroom as the ultimate teacher.



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Curtis Ogden currently works for the Center for Teen Empowerment in Boston. Prior to this

position, he was Coordinator of the ImPACT service learning program at The Learning Web in Ithaca, New York. He has also worked with youth in Harare, Zimbabwe. He holds a B.A. in anthropology from the University of Michigan and has written and presented on the topics of service learning, youth empowerment, and social change. Most recently he co-edited a book with Jeff Claus entitled *Service Learning for Youth Empowerment and Social Change* (Peter Lang, 1999). This fall he will begin pursuing a Master's degree at the Harvard Divinity School and Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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