Service-Learning: Its Definitions and Components

Service-learning is a relatively young concept in American education. The term *service-learning* was first used in 1966 to describe a project linking college students in Tennessee with organizations involved in studying river tributaries as a part of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Soon after, educators defined service-learning as the term used to describe the combining of educational growth with the accomplishment of tasks to meet genuine human needs. This definition was officially adopted at the Atlanta Service-Learning Conference in 1969 (Titlebaum, Williamson, Daprano, Baer, & Brahler, 2004).

Various definitions have emerged since 1969 as service-learning has continued to grow and change. Because service-learning can take a variety of forms, defining service-learning is a challenging task (Wade, 1997). It is important to distinguish initially between community service and service-learning. Of the two educational activities, community service is the lesser involved and does not purposefully connect to the curriculum. Community service is commonly defined as the performing of a service by individuals for the benefit of others. These *others* can be individuals, groups, organizations, or communities as a whole. Community service is usually performed without a focus on learning (Burns, 1997; Westat & Chapman, 1999).

Service-learning is both an educational philosophy and a teaching method (Shumer, 1997). When students at a local elementary school collect canned goods at Thanksgiving to be donated to the local food pantry for distribution, they are performing an act of community service. In comparison, students participating in service-learning may also collect canned foods, but their activity is directly connected to the curriculum.
In service-learning, the students integrate their learning in subject areas such as health, language arts, and social studies by not only collecting the canned foods, but also writing a pamphlet on the importance of eating a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and proteins. The food pantry workers then distribute copies of the pamphlets along with the canned goods to needy families. These same students then extend their learning by visiting a first grade classroom and performing a skit on the importance of eating healthy foods. Throughout this process, they write journal entries about what they have learned about healthy eating habits and what they contributed personally to the project. During class reflection discussions, the students can share what they learned about the importance of leadership, helping others, and working together toward a common goal.

Because of this difference in the depth of student involvement and curricular connections between service-learning and community service, the definition of service-learning includes 3 major concepts—a connection to the academic curriculum, a partnership with a group outside the classroom, and reflection on the service and the learning that occurred.

There are also important components of service-learning as a teaching method. In reviewing the diverse terminology used in the literature, I have categorized the major essential elements of service-learning into four major phases: preparation, action, reflection, and demonstration/celebration.

During the preparation phase, students, with help from teachers, identify a need and begin to research the topic (Billig & Klute, 2002). Teachers design classroom activities to help students personalize and learn about the chosen issue. From there, teachers and students begin to generate plans for action and establishing partnerships with
community agencies, other schools or classrooms, or national groups for additional learning resources and service opportunities (Kaye, 2004). In effective service-learning projects, student voice is valued in the selection, design, implementation, and evaluation of the project, with teachers serving as facilitators of learning. Appropriate selection of the service activity involves clearly stating the goals of the activity, making sure the service activity meets a genuine need, and involves tasks that are significant and that have real consequences (National Service-Learning Cooperative, 1998). When students have responsibility for events that have real consequences, they are more likely to take the activity and their learning more seriously (Shumer, 1997).

The importance of community partnership is most strongly connected to the second phase of service-learning, which is the action phase. As students transition into the action phase, they continue to gather resources and information by interacting with the community partner directly involved with the issue. Because of questions raised and answered, students begin to think more deeply about the issue and its social context and begin to experience first-hand the results of their learning in action. They apply their knowledge, energy, skills, and enthusiasm in showing concern for others and begin to appreciate the contributions of their classmates and other school and community partnerships (Kaye, 2004).

Following community action, ideally in a quality placement offering a diverse perspective, reflection is the third phase of implementation in the service-learning processes. Reflection purposefully ties service in the action phase to the academic learning in the preparation phase. Some students naturally share about their experiences with friends, relatives, roommates, and classmates. Other students need specific direction
in the reflective process before they can become thoughtful about their experiences and personal growth (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Reflection allows time for the integration of learning and experience and awareness of personal growth. Students begin to see the impact of combining what they learned and its effect on their future thinking and action. It is also important that adults model the reflective process for students (Kaye, 2004).

An additional challenge for teachers is incorporating the fourth and final phase of service-learning following the preparation, action, and reflection phases: demonstration/celebration. There is a variety of methods to acknowledge student work, and to celebrate and validate their service to the community. The public, the school community and the community-at-large, should have the opportunity to publicly recognize the positive contributions the students have made to the community. Through this celebration, students have the opportunity to envision their future as a valuable resource in their community, not just as recipients of service, but also as providers (National Service-Learning Cooperative, 1998).

In addition to celebration as a culminating phase, demonstration provides students with the opportunity for them to share what they have learned and accomplished in their communities. Students can exhibit their expertise through public displays, speeches, and letters to the editor, for example. Author Cathryn Kaye (2004) advocates demonstration instead of celebration because demonstration allows students to confirm what they have learned and continue to learn more. Through this demonstration process, students not only teach others, but also acknowledge to themselves the depth and breadth of their learning. Students are able to take charge of their own learning as they integrate and synthesize their learning and demonstrate to others what they have learned (Kaye, 2004).
In conclusion, service-learning may potentially have as many definitions as it does teachers who implement it as a teaching method. In reviewing the literature, there are three major components that distinguish service-learning from other teaching methods such as community service and other experiential learning concepts. Those determining factors are a direct link to the curriculum; a direct, purposeful connection to an organization outside the classroom; and a systemic method for reflection and evaluation. When examining the major phases of service-learning and their various components, researchers and authors have determined that there are many important phases in creating and implementing a successful service-learning program, the most important of which are preparation, action, reflection, and celebration/demonstration.
References


