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Chapter 1

The Fundamentals of Community Service as a Curriculum Model



What Is Community Service Learning?

Community service learning is in-context learning that connects specific educational goals with meaningful community service. Community service learning projects include a dual focus: the goals of academic learning and the goals of authentic volunteer projects. Students learn course content as well as skills, strengthening their thinking skills as they develop empathy, personal ethics, and the habit of helping their communities. Learning through community service helps students understand their connectedness to and importance in their communities as they experience the role of service provider (rather than the role of service receiver).

Thomas Dewey, William Kilpatrick, and other experts associated with the progressive education movement of the early 1900s argued that this experience would help students see the usefulness of their classroom learning in solving community problems. More recently, Wigginton (1985), Goodlad (1984), and Boyer (1983) advocated using community service projects to promote social reform. As students do community service projects, they not only experience learning, they experience a commitment to doing meaningful and authentic work, a sense of empowerment and joy in doing service that needs to be done, as well as a sense of community that results in providing help to others.

Why Formalise Community Service Learning?

Community service learning strengthens students in many different ways. Students who learn to do for others, rather than 'being done for' by others, become more self-confident and develop more self-esteem. They feel that they are useful members of the community who can identify problems, propose solutions, act independently in implementing solutions, and open



themselves to new experiences and roles as they do so. Students gain self-respect as they develop the real-life skills of being on the job on time, having good attendance, and doing the work that they have promised to do.

Often, in discovering that mistakes are opportunities for problem solving, brainstorming, and growth, students learn to treat others as they themselves want to be treated, to have empathy for the problems and concerns of others, and to defer gratification as they work toward long-term goals. Students who learn these components of emotional intelligence will be more successful throughout their lives (Goleman 1995).

Because volunteer projects are done in conjunction with others in the community, students improve their communication and cooperation skills. Ideally, they gain respect and appreciation for people from socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups other than their own. They feel the inner joy, warmth, and satisfaction that come from giving to others and being accepted by others.

Learning through community service is brain-compatible learning. Because the learning is done in a real-world context, students' brains will construct meaning from the learning and remember it effortlessly (Fogarty 1997a). Students will be able to recall the learning easily, especially when they revisit the original learning circumstances and locations. Furthermore, students experiencing community service learning will be able to update their learnings with little effort. The brain learns best when feelings are positive, and students feel happy, trusted, included, empowered, independent, and capable as they do community service learning projects. These emotions trigger the mid-brain to produce a variety of hormones that brain researchers believe to be memory 'fixatives,' so the positive emotions that the students feel will result in more learning that is remembered longer (Jensen 1996).

In general, learners are motivated when they are given some choices about what to learn and how to learn it. Students doing community service learning participate in choosing and structuring a particular project. Ideally, they have some control over what community service project they will do, how the project will be structured, when they will work on it, and how long the project will last. Students, therefore, feel motivated to learn; these positive feelings lead to more effective learning of content as well as skill.

How Does Learning through Community Service Work?

There are many successful formulas for doing community service learning. Robin Fogarty (1997b) suggests that these formulas have the following elements or steps in common:

1. Selecting the need for community service
2. Finding a community partner
3. Aligning the community service experience with educational goals