



An On-Campus Service Learning Project

By Maggie Weis

Can we do More Than Just Raise Money?

In June of 2003, I attended a Service Learning Seminar sponsored by the Bay Area Teacher's Development Collaborative. During that week, I was inspired by speakers and envious of their Service Learning programs. I attended this seminar as the Student Council Advisor for the middle school at The San Francisco School, an independent preschool through eighth grade school. In my Advisor's role, I had overseen fundraisers for local programs serving youth in recovery, overseas organizations concerned with child labor issues, and for victims of natural disasters. We had held petition drives for legislative issues and we organized annual food and toy drives. Though we were accomplishing Community Service, I often had the nagging thought that something was missing in our approach.

We were raising money and getting goods to people in need. However, we weren't raising student awareness about social justice. We weren't seeing how the organizations used the money and we had no direct contact with the recipients of the money or goods. Also, while the Student Council members engaged in considerable discussion about choosing organizations and how to organize their fundraising event, the general student body did not go through this process and received only a brief report on the decisions the Student Council had made. I had often briefly puzzled over these shortcomings and then, pressed by other responsibilities, forgot them. It was just two months before this seminar that a student brought the issue back to the forefront. The Student Council had just raised money for an organization and was pondering whom we could help next. Our Vice President, Melissa Olague, rather innocently asked if we could do more than just raise money. When I asked what more she wanted to do, she indicated she would like to learn more about the issues or the people involved. She was begging for Service Learning!

Community Service vs. Service Learning

At the Service Learning seminar I learned to distinguish between Community Service and Service Learning. Community Service is often a "one-shot deal" in which you perform some form of service for an organization and it may or may not integrate with curriculum. In many community service projects, an adult chooses the activity and makes all the decisions about how and when the students will perform.

In Service Learning, a project is carefully planned by educators and meets an authentic need in the community. There are continuous links between classroom instruction and the actual service as it progresses. The service project involves activities that students themselves help plan in collaboration with school and community members. In addition, students have decision making and problem-solving capabilities within the project to foster a sense of ownership. A crucial component of the learning process is structured time to allow students to reflect upon their service experiences. ¹

With these differences in mind, I realized that I too had been begging for Service Learning!

Background to Choosing the Service Learning Project

The principles of Service Learning gave me a blueprint to enhance the quality of students' service and learning. Now I needed a project. I remembered how often I had heard fellow staffers comment that our Middle School kids were terrific at saving whales but not cognizant of caring for each other and their school. They had been enthusiastic and industrious when putting together school supply packets for children in Laos but didn't seem to think twice about cracking a pencil in half and leaving it for someone else to pick up on our campus. They had joyously wrapped clothing and toys for homeless families for the winter holidays but hadn't seen their own lack of awareness regarding our constantly overflowing lost and found. They had been disgusted by the amount and variety of waste we had picked up at a beach clean-up but still either didn't notice or didn't care that their own plastic lunch bags had drifted away at lunch time.

I was thinking that our own community had an authentic need and our campus was the ideal focus for our initial Middle School Service Learning program. This would be veering from my original intent to re-structure the service activities we were already performing but it only seemed proper to start in our own community. It actually seemed more than proper. It seemed dire that students be stewards of their own campus before they could move towards stewardship of the earth and its inhabitants.

At this point, a Task Assignment Form developed by Youth Service California² helped me to focus my thoughts (Figure 1). I envisioned a number of committees working on challenges related to the daily operations of the school. The committee challenges would range from improving the building, grounds, equipment and materials to directly impacting policies and practices. These on-campus projects would vary to allow for diverse interests but they would provide students with the common experience of becoming stewards of their community. If middle school students had a greater stake in the planning and building of their community, I hoped that they would gain heightened awareness of community. It would establish civic participation as a normal part of their school day. It would let students know that our school valued, needed, and relied upon them and their opinions.

The Need for Administrative Support

The Head and Assistant Head of School, Terry Edeli and Ann Jaquith respectively, had encouraged me to attend the Service Learning Seminar and so I knew they would be supportive of improving our service learning program. What I needed was further guidance in refining, planning, and presenting the entire project to staff and students. We would need staff "buy-in" and administrative encouragement was not an absolute necessity but would certainly be advantageous. From there, we would need guaranteed meeting times for staff training throughout the project. We would also need to plan student meetings that would have the least impact on their regular schedule of classes.

In July, I met with Ann Jaquith to discuss the overall project idea and logistics. She brought a wealth of wisdom to the project and whipped out the calendar to plan our dates. We set the structure of the staff meeting on our first day back and included a beach clean-up as part of the day! We also decided on the structure of the student committee

Figure 1. Task Assignment Form

Task One: Write a brief description of a project that you would like to create or improve.

Stewardship: A project in which middle school students demonstrate ownership, care, and responsibility for their own environment which would include their personal belongings, school equipment and materials, school policies, the neighborhood, each other, and natural resources in the area.

Task Two: List the Service and learning goals that you have for this project.

SERVICE GOALS	LEARNING GOALS
Devise a system for backpacks to be off the ground (build totem poles or install hooks to hang them from)	- applying measurement skills, - what tools are needed and how to use them safely - safety awareness - civic participation
Devise a grade specific ball storage system (build new cabinets or locate appropriate storage) - applying measurement skills,	- what tools are needed and how to use them safely - enhance responsibility for equipment - civic participation
Promote the schools' sexual harassment policy with peers – define what sexual harassment is	- evaluate policy and refine if necessary - apply writing skills - refine oral presentation skills

Task Three: Answer the following two questions:

A. How is the service experience going to enhance the learning experience in the classroom?

If the students create and improve their own environment (community), their awareness of their surroundings, interactions with one another, and respect for materials should be enhanced. If interactions with adults (teachers and administration) are supportive and reciprocal during the service, those relationships can continue in the classroom. By cooperating with peers on projects, students can learn about each other and honor each others strengths.

B. How is the classroom experience going to enhance the service experience?

If students can directly apply skills they learn in the classroom, they could be more motivated to learn and hone those skills. For example, if learning fractions and they are responsible for building something on the premises, they can see an immediate, real world application of that branch of math knowledge. If studying liquids and they can conduct tests of water sources on campus, the skills have concrete applications bringing the process vividly to life.

Task Four: For each of the following elements of high quality service learning, describe two action steps that you can take to contribute to effective implementation.

A. Collaboration

1. Students can make video presentations of results of their efforts to share with the elementary students.
2. Students can collaborate to make oral presentations (including visual displays) to the entire middle school and ask for feedback on the direction of their projects.

B. Youth Voice

1. Students can choose from a variety of committees to join

2. Students will be encouraged throughout the project to evaluate, make recommendations, refine, and present their findings. meetings, the number of meetings, and the amount of time necessary for each of those meetings to accomplish the learning and the projects. We made extensive use of Town Meetings, tutorials, and advisory times for seven meetings throughout the first three weeks of school.

Town Meetings are once-a-week, half-hour community building and information disseminating meetings of the entire middle school student body and staff. Tutorials are half-hour to 45 minute periods when students can consult with teachers for individual help, work in the computer lab, or do research in the library. Advisories are groups of ten students and one adult who meet weekly to focus on social and emotional learning as well as to guide students in study and organizational skills. Although the ideal service learning program would be fully integrated in the curriculum and across subjects, we felt it wisest to start the year off with as little impact on academic scheduling as possible.

The Plan for Staff

When staff returned to school in August, we met and I shared what I had learned about Service Learning. I explained the overall project. The staff enthusiastically brainstormed projects at our first meeting and then each staff member chose a project they would be interested in facilitating. The final projects are explained in Figure 2 – Service Learning Committees. At each additional weekly staff meeting, we could train the staff in the activities and materials we were developing for the next step of the project.

In our first meeting, we discussed the following concerns and topics:

- The ideal adult-to-student ratio for project committees.
- Gender and age issues in dividing committees.
- The overall Schedule of Activities for the projects.
- Beginning each committee meeting with a cooperative game that fits the thematic focus of the meeting.
- Remind staff to facilitate the committee meeting and not solve the challenges for them! Frame all challenges as questions.
- Being explicit about learning and citizenship at all stages of the project.

The faculty decided to have six students (a boy and girl from each grade) on each committee. With 96 students, we needed 16 projects, 16 staff members, and 16 meeting places. With collaboration as a principle, administrators were also included as group facilitators. This made so much sense when projects directly related to their jobs and as a way for students to get to know some of the adults on campus who were usually tucked away in an office.

By the time the first day of school arrived, we had to cancel one project. We realized the two staff members assigned to the Song Book Project would not always be available for staff or student meeting times we had set aside for Service Learning. While their song books project was certainly worthy, we felt that the staff training and steps we were taking with each project meeting were vital to the students' learning and so we arrived at 15 projects with 6 to 7 students per committee.

Service Learning Committees

1. Totem pole/hooks for backpacks: Since lockers aren't large enough to hold backpacks, they are often strewn around the yard and pose a tripping hazard. What can we do to enhance safety?
2. Building grade level ball storage: One rack of balls was available to middle school and at the end of recesses or daycare; the balls were left in the yard. If there was separate grade level ball storage, could they demonstrate greater responsibility about returning equipment?
3. Making Hockey nets/goals: We didn't have any goals but we had two nets. If we could build our own pick goals, would the students learn to rely on their own ingenuity before running off to purchase something new?
4. Installing Planter Boxes around the perimeter of the schoolyard: Just inside our front gate and along the middle school lunch area walls the scene was barren. Could we enhance the appearance of the area?
5. Walkathon Committee: Every year, our Walkathon raised money for special projects. Usually, there was scant participation by the middle school. What would interest the students in attending this event and contributing to the fundraising?
6. Islais Creek Committee: We knew that Islais Creek flowed somewhere near or under our campus but we weren't certain. What could we learn about the location of the creek and the health of the water in it?
7. Sexual Harassment Policy & Practice: What is the policy? Does it need to be refined? How does it get promoted and can we improve that?
8. Town Meeting Committee: Can the structure of our Town Meetings be improved to make it more pertinent and involve everyone more? The purpose of these weekly half-hour gatherings of the Middle School staff and student body were to provide time to share issues of concern on campus and in the world. It was also used as a time to make general announcements and conduct Student Council nominations, speeches, and elections.
9. Lost and Found: A cabinet near the entrance to the office area holds all the lost and found. It is overflowing daily. What can we do to improve awareness of one's own belongings and the appearance of the lost and found cabinet?
10. Middle School Lit/Newsletter: We don't have a newspaper or forum for sharing writing and art. Can we publish a newsletter?
11. Procedures for reporting broken/damaged materials/structures: When equipment or furniture is broken by students, they don't always report it and safety issues could arise. How can we make reporting these issues non-threatening and who would they report to?
12. Bilingual School Brochures: Though we have non-English speaking parents and prospective parents, we only have informative handbooks and promotional materials in English. Can we translate any of these materials into Spanish or Chinese?
13. Making song books: Singing is embedded in the culture of the school but new students and visitors don't know the words to all the songs we sing at special events. Can we devise song books so they can heartily join in singing?
14. North class water diversion to the elementary/middle school yard: With a human-made river in the preschool yard, the water currently flows off the school property to a ditch between the school and the highway behind us. Could this water be diverted to the other yard for recreational or learning purposes?
15. M.S. comic book/graphic novel section of library: Could the library be a venue for comic books and graphic novels and, if so, how would it operate in a school with younger students?
16. Bike Rack: Is there a need for a bike rack at our school? If so, how could we buy one and where would it be located?

Figure 2. Service Learning Committees

The Plan for Students

At our first Town Meeting of the year, we explained Service Learning, the projects students could choose, and a description of how we would organize the committees. We intentionally didn't detail or plan the projects in this meeting because we wanted the students to assess the school's needs and work accordingly. After that meeting, students went to Advisory Groups where they could ask more questions and sign up for all the projects they might be interested in. We did make a conscious decision not to indicate which adults were going to be overseeing each project because we wanted the students to choose the project for its own merits not for which adult they liked to spend time with.

Once we'd collected sign up sheets, Ann and I sat down with a tally sheet and began to plug students in to projects. I did have to wonder if there was a computer program which could sort the kids more easily. One particularly amusing and personalized aspect of the sorting being done by us (rather than a computer) was that we could place students in projects we thought they could especially benefit from, or bring their own talents to. One example was that we placed two students on the Lost and Found project whose belongings were always strewn around the school. By lunch recess, we had posted the Service Learning Committees and Meeting Places and included who the adult facilitator would be on this sheet. That afternoon, committees met for the first time and the plan for each committee meeting is detailed below.

First Committee Meeting:

- a. Staff member leads a getting-to-know-you activity in which students identify who they are and why they were drawn to this particular challenge.
- b. Identify what the project challenges are and why this challenge exists. Why do they think this project was placed on this list?
- c. Reflect on what value there is to this overall activity. Be explicit about citizenship, community, and relating service to learning.
- d. Reflect on the groups interactions in this meeting.
- e. Determine how this group will make decisions. Will they vote and, if so, will it be a hand vote or a written vote? Will decisions be made by consensus?

Second Committee Meeting:

- a. Play The Great Communicator³. Purpose: To improve verbal communication. Students pair off. One with a diagram they must explain to the other. The other student is attempting to accurately draw the diagram according to the verbal instructions. After two minutes, compare diagrams and switch roles. Discuss the role of verbal accuracy in trying to express one's self during these meetings.
- b. Brainstorm solutions to the challenge this committee has and discuss them.
- c. Are there any more challenges to this project?
- d. Adopt a plan and if the group hasn't already decided how to make decisions, finalize that now.
- e. Post solutions on posters for presentations to the entire Middle School. Would a visual aid help this activity? If so, who will design it? Leave space on the poster for additional comments the other students will make at Town Meeting.
- f. Discuss building coalitions and describe next week's Town Meeting plan. At that meeting, Each committee will have a poster on display in the Activity Room. Each person on the committee will make an oral presentation on some aspect of their challenge and their solution. Be explicit that the oral presentation is a skill they're utilizing to accomplish their goal and tie it directly to the Great Communicator activity we started today.

Committee Presentations at Town Meeting

- a. Each committee makes their oral presentations.
- b. Two members of each committee stay at their displays while remaining members travel around the room and give feedback to other committees. Rotate students every two minutes so that all members receive feedback at their displays.
- c. Whole group commentary on this process.

Third Committee Meeting

- a. Take input and hone plan.
- b. What will a successful outcome look like? What will it take to arrive at this outcome? Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?
- c. Assign materials gatherers/interviewers/shoppers. Encourage students to use the September 12 day off from school to gather materials, etc.
- d. Decide the skills and knowledge they will need to complete the challenge. How can they attain these skills and knowledge? Make learning goals explicit. Have them describe the standards that should be met.
- e. Develop a rubric, checklist, or set of goals that will be used to evaluate their projects.

Fourth Committee Meeting -Action Meeting!

- a. Perform the work/discussions necessary to accomplish the goals in the plan.
- b. Finish with an evaluation of how the group progressed. What they still need to do to accomplish this plan and how to adjust the process to do this. Discuss opening up the project at recesses for others to participate.
- c. Discuss how to present results thus far at the next Town Meeting. Could the presentation be a song, poem, map, or rubric? Does this presentation include explicit acknowledgement of what they've learned in the project?

Town Meeting

- a. Share results of committees' Action Meetings and indicate any further steps or plans. Celebrate the accomplishments with juice and breakfast bars!

Reflection in Advisories

- a. In this Advisory, students reflect on what they learned (if anything) during the Service Learning projects. The Advisor has a copy of the Service Learning Data Record Sheet (Figure 3) and chooses a recorder to write down responses to each category of learning.

Service Learning Data Record Sheet for Cathy's Advisory

Service Learning Group	Academic	Interpersonal	Social Action	Practical
Planter Boxes	Problem Solving About wind	Group Consensus & working with different people	Contributing to a prettier campus	
Islais Creek	Problem Solving	Group Consensus and working with different grades	Educating the school so they'll save the creek	Sign Making
Walk-a-thon		Listening to others	Giving funds to charity	New ways to make money
Soccer goals	measurement	Working with others		Learning how to make goals
Bike rack	measurement	Interacting with staff; Listening and helping	Less people will drive	Cost of supplies; how to order a bike rack
Town Meeting	Speaking skills	Interacting with other grades; ask- ing questions; appealing to stu- dent council to work with other groups	Town Meeting will be better and this will build a better community	Asking for money; public speaking
Procedures for Reporting Broken Equipment	Priorities	Working in a group; Meeting Miriam (adminis- trator)	School is safer	Tightened the water fountain
Ball Storage	Should have meas- ured	Teamwork		How to put a hasp on a door
Comic Books		Got to know peo- ple more than we did	Comics in libraries	Strategies to get comics

Figure 3. Service Learning Data Record Sheet

Lessons Learned

This was an invigorating project for me to be involved so closely with. I appreciated the efforts of each committee and, as we progressed through this project, I recognized many ways to improve it. The following changes would enhance the learning, the overall process, and the wrapping up of the entire project.

1. Staff Training: With 16 different adults facilitating committees, the wording and intentions could get muddled. In the future, I would develop a standard worksheet for teachers to have at each committee

meeting to guide them through the process better. At each staff meeting I would also emphasize how crucial it is for the adults to refrain from providing solutions but instead to frame their questions to help the students arrive at their solutions.

2. Accordingly, the wording of the sign-up sheets already contained solutions to some of the challenges. I should have worded the sign up sheets without any verbs. For example, building grade level ball storage should have simply been labeled "ball storage".
3. The reflection sheet (Service Learning Data Record Sheet) should have also had an attachment for the teachers to refer to so that precise language could be used to elicit responses from kids about what they learned. Each Advisor had their own understanding (or misunderstanding) of how that sheet should be used and so, the answers varied from checks being placed under the categories they'd learned about to one word responses in each box to eloquent explanations of deep learning that occurred.
4. The planning should have included accommodations for committees that needed more time to finish their projects and for committees that concluded their projects earlier than the others. I would seek staff agreement on the solution to this challenge.
5. Administrative staff could not always attend training meetings and so were less prepared to be explicit about the learning. Some were also more intimidated by middle school students and so, in the future, I would meet separately with them for training since they wanted additional support for just interacting with adolescents.
6. Some groups needed to consult with Administrators about policies or whether there was money available to fund their project. Since most Administrators were also on committees, it was harder for students to follow up on meeting with the proper contact. In the future, I would want the Head or Assistant Head of School and the Business Manager available as resources during meeting times. If we absolutely needed them on projects, we would need to schedule times they would be available to see representatives from each committee and make sure those students used those scheduled times to get the information they needed.
7. When the students gave their oral presentations at Town Meeting, we could have reinforced the value placed on public speaking by having each student have a rubric to evaluate each group's presentation. These rubrics could have been returned to each group to receive the feedback and better prepare for their final presentation at the end of the project. Again, I would seek staff input on the development of the rubric or, if staff could agree on adding the time necessary, have students develop the rubric.

Interestingly, neither the staff nor the students used the terms "stewardship" or "citizenship" in their evaluations of what was learned. That really struck me and I realized that none of the printed materials I had distributed had included the term "stewardship" although some included the term "citizenship". Stewardship had been one of the primary goals and I had not articulated it clearly myself. Many of the lessons learned related directly to improving my own communication and explicitness, and then codifying the ideal wording.

Between the feedback at a staff evaluation meeting and the students' evaluations, there was a lot to be excited about with this project! The staff wholeheartedly agreed this was an ideal project to set the tone for the beginning of the school year! They appreciated that small groups with equal grade and gender representation were effective at letting the entire committee get to know each other and allowing quieter students a chance to speak up more. They were also very excited about attention being given to our campus needs.

Student evaluations included acknowledgements that they were learning how to apply math, English, Spanish, and public speaking skills. Some of my favorite evaluations were the "Practical" things they'd learned and included such diverse skills as how to order bike racks; how to attach a hasp to a door; and how to safely use a drill, a wrench, a hatchet, and a screwdriver. Many indicated they also appreciated getting to

know administrators and students from other grades.

I'm looking forward to making the aforementioned changes and to growing this service learning project with the entire community. I believe we can continue to help the students develop the skills necessary to be stewards of their community and that while money is sometimes necessary, the students learned to do a whole lot more than just raise money!

References

1. Education Commission of the States (ECS) and the Compact for Learning and Citizenship, Service Learning and Standards Tool Kit (Denver, CO: ECS, 2001), p.6
2. Youth Service California, 663 13th Street, Oakland, CA, 94612, www.yscal.org
3. Daniel W. Midura and Donald R. Glover, More Team Building Challenges (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995), p. 16-18

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