

Service-Learning in Dartmouth Public Schools

Jacob Miller

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Abstract

Service-learning is a proven teaching and learning method that increases student success. This proposal for the Dartmouth, MA school district serves as a case study and example for how other districts can implement service-learning. First, I introduce service-learning as a pedagogy, leading into a discussion about the issues surrounding learning engagement and citizenship. I finish the piece with challenges, two policy alternatives with a final recommendation, and a discussion around lessons learned. Service-learning has proven benefits to the school and its community. This recommendation and research done for the Dartmouth Public Schools can be used as a national example for how college students in service-learning courses can assist school districts in adopting this pedagogy.

Introduction

Service-learning is defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (“What is Service-Learning”). Currently, educators are looking for ways to engage students with their community, yet most students are being taught with standardized tests in mind or spending learning time on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines, leaving many without training on how to be an active citizen. I argue, without experience in the community, students cannot effectively engage in society outside of the classroom. Service-learning allows schools to achieve teaching and learning standards, while giving students the hands-on experience that facilitates civic knowledge. School systems should consider service-learning as a crucial component to student and societal success.

A distinction between service-learning and a community service requirement must be made. As one of the teachers commented in the March 2014 Dartmouth Public Schools survey, “People need to understand the difference between community service and service-learning very clearly for a program that focuses on service-learning to succeed.” Service-learning facilitates learning, while a community service requirement has students complete hours without relating it to learning. Service-learning plans may include an hours requirement, but each hour is connected back to learning. After completing interviews and conducting research with districts across the state and country, in March of 2014, I found that simple community service requirements do not directly accomplish learning goals. Many districts require a set amount of service hours. For example, the Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia asks students to complete ten hours of service a year. Its qualification of service-learning is so broad it even includes belonging to an extracurricular club or watching a neighbor’s children. A broad definition of service-learning often leads to students attempting to use babysitting and shoveling neighbors’ driveways as community service. While these activities can be valuable, service-learning should have a direct correlation to learning and should facilitate higher forms of engagement, progress in school, and community attachment.

Engaging and Educating Future Citizens

Service-learning is used both to increase civic responsibility and to facilitate academic objectives. There are several elements that facilitate student learning in a service-learning course, including: the type of program, the quality of reflection and integration, the matching of placement agencies and activities with learning goals, and the duration and intensity of the experience.

Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* asserts, “The science that studies the supreme good for man is politics. Politics is not an exact science, the student should have some general knowledge and experience of life” (Crisp 2000). Service-learning allows students to go out in the community, and interact with different stakeholders and issues. This is beneficial for academic learning, as well as social learning. Students will be able to become more engaged academically and socially. States across the country are beginning to require service to give students more experience. This past year, the Washington State Legislature passed a law that requires high school students to engage in service. As the first section of the law states:

The legislature finds that volunteering connects students to their communities and provides an opportunity for students to practice and apply their academic and social skills in preparation for entering the workforce. Community service can better prepare and inspire students to continue their education beyond high school. Community service is also associated with increased civic awareness and participation by students. Therefore, the legislature intends to incorporate an expectation for each student to participate in community service as one aspect of meeting high school graduation requirements. (Washington State Legislature 2013)

While a service requirement that gives students more community experience can be valuable, service-learning is a much more holistic approach because it connects service back to curriculum.

Student and teacher surveys illustrate the acceptance of this type of policy and the need to integrate the service into the classroom. When asked to respond to the statement: “I believe that Dartmouth Public Schools should add mandatory service-learning into the curriculum,” 60% of teachers either agreed or strongly agreed. Students were asked to respond to a similar question and the majority either had no opinion or agreed. Looking at the surveys, one can discern that students wish to be guided in their service. Almost 58% of students want schools to provide a time to serve. This suggests support for service-learning and the idea of connecting experience to learning.

Theoretical Approach

American students have been shown to be civically apathetic, with many blaming the educational system (Morgan and Streb 2002). The lack of civic training can be examined through a thought-experiment, provided by Eamonn Callan (2004) in his book *Creating Citizens*: “Imagine an enviably wealthy and peaceful society. With the particular rights that are required of any liberal democracy—rights to political participation, freedom of expression, religious practice, equality before the courts and the like.” Callan continues, “But when elections are held, scarcely anyone bothers to vote. The mass media ignore politics because the consumers to whom they cater do not care.” (3).

It can be argued that the world Callan imagines could be ours. Without a strong civic education, citizens can become “indifferent to questions of good and evil, seeing the point of their life simply as the satisfaction of their desires, or else they commit themselves so rigidly to a particular doctrine that dialogue with those who are not like-minded is thought to be repellent or futile.” Service-learning is one of the methods to teach students civic skills. According to William Morgan and Matthew Streb (2002), service-learning projects where “students make important decisions, and have real responsibility helps combat civic apathy.” They continue by asserting “when students participate in service-learning projects in which they are given leadership, their propensity to participate increases both now and in the future.” This community experience creates other learning outcomes.

Service-learning will represent a shift in the classroom from a “banking model,” where teachers are active, depositing and periodically withdrawing intellectual capital from students, who are mostly passive. In this model, classes follow a predetermined structure, learning stimuli are uniform for all students, and each class and each assignment follow a similar routine (Howard 1998). The implementation of service-learning will shift the classroom toward a more balanced relationship between the students and the teacher. Service-learning can aid in preventing our country from becoming the one Callan created in his thought experiment. The United States relies on informed citizen participation. For Callan, without informed citizens, our democracy cannot sustain itself.

According to Jane David (2009), “Reading about democracy and how government works are poor substitutes for active participation in civic decision making.” Rather than having students learn only in the classroom, service-learning opens up opportunities for them to be a part of their community. According to The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), service-learning is at the top of the educational practices that “have been proven effective in promoting civic learning.” Many constrain service to include working directly with those in need. Yet, service-learning can include much more, for example both research for a community member or leading activism campaigns can be considered service. High school math classes in Maryland’s Allegany County often help do accounting work for local food pantries or present to younger grades on the importance of math in everyday life. This service is broad, yet it helps the community and the individual application of knowledge.

Service-learning is a difficult policy to mandate across varied school systems; each class, student, and teacher has a different perspective on needs and issues. This plan will take a lot more effort and resources because it requires that you place students in projects that help people and foster learning. A curriculum that requires service-learning would also need to require reflection. Along with exams, students would need to reflect on their experiences because “it is not enough to just have an experience. Reflection directs that experience to learning and deeper thought” (Stevens and Cooper 2009).

The importance of reflection is outlined by John Dewey (1990) in *Democracy and Education*: “Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it. When an activity is continued into the undergoing of consequences, when the change made by action is reflected back into a change made in us, the mere flux is loaded with significance. We learn something.” Dewey and other scholars recognize the importance of experience in learning. Service-learning provides a direct experience in the community. Learning through experience has shown higher results in learning and connection to society; service-learning will allow students to be active participants in this work.

Against Service-Learning

In his article, *Academic Service-Learning: A Counternormative Pedagogy*, Jeffery Howard (1998) breaks down the challenges of switching from the previously mentioned “banking model of education” to service-learning. There is a conflict of goals, where the traditional classroom seeks to engage students individually and competitively and is self-oriented. Most classes do not ask students to examine the greater good, while orientation towards others is “discouraged.” Service-learning classes attempt to directly examine the complex issues outside of the classroom. This pedagogy asks students to learn inductively, while typical classrooms ask students to learn deductively. Service-learning attempts to bridge both types of learning. In service-learning classrooms, a teacher has to give up some control. Unlike the classroom, the community is not a controlled environment. With extra variables, like communication with community partners or coordinating travel, teachers will have to be ready to work with a greater degree of uncertainty. For service-learning to work, students also need to be willing to be active learners. Without openness toward student contributions and students’ willingness to be engaged, courses will not be successful.

Arguments against service-learning stem from a study done by Deci and Ryan (1985) which found that mandating service could have a perverse effect on students wanting to serve past their requirement: “External events relevant to the initiation or regulation of behavior will affect a person’s intrinsic motivation to the extent that they influence the perceived locus of causality for that behavior. Events that promote a more external perceived locus of causality will undermine intrinsic motivation, whereas those that promote a more internal perceived locus of causality will enhance intrinsic motivation.” Those who are against service-learning use this study to show that it is counterproductive. Deci and Ryan are able to show that when forced to complete an action, people are less likely to do it on their own. This can be problematic for service. By using this study, detractors of service-learning believe that the students who are serving in their classroom will not go on and continue to do so throughout life.

Individuals across the political spectrum agree that there needs to be some kind of civic education or service based learning in schools, but there is disagreement around the nature of that education. Some believe that civic and service education has no place in public schools. James Murphy (2007) believes that, “the proper aim of schools to foster a love of genuine knowledge is always and everywhere subverted when they attempt to foster civic virtue.” He continues to argue, “schools can play a small though significant role in teaching civic knowledge and that schools can indirectly foster civic skills by encouraging extracurricular participation in student government and other voluntary organizations.” Murphy’s argument asserts that schools should not compel students to do voluntary work. He does not necessarily diminish the importance of it, yet he believes that schools should play a hands-off role in fostering civic skills.

The cost and effort put into developing comprehensive service-learning plans may push many districts away from this pedagogy. School districts must devote resources in order for service-learning to work. In Maryland, the most successful county has a devoted service-learning staff member at the district level. For service-learning to be successful, school systems need to be willing to provide resources. There are numerous ways districts can implement this plan, but based on interviews and research there are two viable options.

Policy Alternatives

Required Service-Learning Class as Part of First Year Curriculum

This policy option would require a service-learning seminar as a part of the first year curriculum. It can be designed around any discipline, including English, History, Math, or Civics. For the purpose of this alternative, it would be best to consider a first-year civics seminar. The class would focus on American Government and have students working on projects related to democracy. Students could do research on how they can engage with their government, potentially attending town government meetings as their service component. They would then journal and present their findings to their classmates. This is one example of the numerous project options.

Having a first-year seminar ensures that every student will have some experience in service-learning. Many schools in Maryland, where service-learning is mandated at the state level, employ this model. It is easier to track and takes less logistical planning because these classes are typically larger and standardized. While ensuring that service standards are met, it could produce little attachment to service and the community. It could become passive and make students feel as if they are just completing another requirement. Dartmouth students surveyed in March 2014 show they are neutral to a service-learning requirement.

Policy Alternative: Curricular Infusion of Service-Learning

This alternative seeks to directly infuse service-learning into curriculums across grade levels. Allegany County in Maryland is considered, by the State Director of Service-Learning, to be the most successful service-learning program in the state. Service is directly infused into almost every curriculum with most in the STEM classrooms. The hours are directly built into the curriculum of each class and have metrics to ensure that they are completed. Allegany County has a service-learning staff member at the district level coordinating the activities and doing the administrative work. With that consideration, curricular infusion requires resources and commitment from the district, teachers, and students.

Curricular infusion can be accomplished using a faculty-fellow and student board model. This alternative takes more time to implement and is not a top-down enforcement. Faculty-fellows would volunteer to take part in a professional development program provided by the UMass Dartmouth Leduc Center for Civic Engagement, and work in a core group to integrate service into their classrooms. Dartmouth teachers overwhelmingly support this model, with 80% either saying “yes” or “possible, with more information” to becoming a faculty fellow. Students also need to buy into service-learning. A student advisory board should be created to work with faculty fellows to ensure that student voices are heard and taken into account when devising service projects. Almost 80% of students either agree or strongly agree that they should determine the projects they work on. As stated, this model will take more resources and has the potential to produce uneven experiences. The Director of the Maryland service-learning program, Julie Ayers, found that “service-learning is all in the delivery.” Service-learning classes, like most classes, will differ from teacher to teacher, but with training most can be brought to a level ground.

The service hours will be built directly into the curriculum, so teachers will have the power to decide how many hours each project will take. The district should recommend a set

number of hours a year or over a four year period, but should be flexible as the program gets started. Curricular infusion requires time and will not be an option that can be wholly implemented next year. Teachers will need to work on curriculum along with administration and community partners to ensure that the service is valuable for students and learning.

Policy Recommendation

Both alternatives are effective routes to service-learning, although a mix of both curricular infusion and an optional freshman seminar class together is the most long-lasting and transformative. In this recommendation, the Dartmouth School District would not mandate participation, but promote it. The school district should incentivize teacher participation in the service-learning program with professional development credits. This model requires all the interested stake-holders coming to the table. Teacher interest along with students opting to take service-learning classes will ensure that service-learning is truly a community endeavor.

By infusing service-learning into the curriculum across grades and in freshman seminar classes every student can be exposed to service at some point in high school. It is crucial that measurements be taken, this can be done by using pre and post surveys. Communities are seeing the value in service and its ability to educate students for life outside of the classroom. Curricular infusion and freshman seminar classes will bridge the gap between service and learning objectives.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

This recommendation for service-learning can be applied to any school district. The process of engaging with stake-holders, collaborating with community organizations, and creating an objective plan with teachers and school committee members can be replicated. Survey data from students in the Dartmouth Public Schools shows support for engaged learning, acting as a microcosm for a national trend towards youth seeking service opportunities. The service-learning movement will continue to gain standing, as communities are looking to solve old problems in new ways and engage students in holistic learning.

Lessons learned include: (1) the need for buy-in and (2) a community need must be addressed. Obtaining a buy-in from students, staff, and administrators is crucial to a service-learning program's success. This can be done by surveying each constituency and presenting the plan with ample time for feedback. Projects are also successful when the community rallies around a community need. With a common goal, all the stakeholders are able to see the benefit of the students and the greater good.

I argue that a service-learning program will greatly improve learning outcomes across school districts. It is not an easy initiative to implement and can make some community members uncomfortable, but building consensus allows for a robust conversation and program to emerge.

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