

Key Principles and Guidelines of Service-Learning

© St Cloud Area Service-Learning Coalition (February 15, 2006)

Introduction: One of the goals of the St Cloud Area Service-Learning Coalition is “to provide a written summary of key theoretical principles and guidelines for practice.”

At the coalition meeting on November 7, 2005, participants brainstormed such principles and guidelines. These ideas were then discussed further at the coalition’s next meeting, on February 15, 2006.

The ideas are divided into two categories:

- essential (i.e. the factor must be present in order for the activity to be considered “service-learning”)
- desirable (i.e. while we strive for the factor to be present, we believe that its absence does not mean the activity is not “service-learning”)

(Note: to indicate that an activity does not qualify as “service-learning” does not mean that we believe it has no value, or that we will not participate in or promote it)

Discussion of these ideas also yielded some additional perspectives and questions (*see Appendix*).

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The numbering is not an indication of priority or essential sequence, but rather just a way of quickly identifying each factor listed.

1. There are one or more actual learners -- described as "someone who is interested in and prepared for the experience"
2. There is an agency/organization with the capacity to support the learning
3. There is an educator* that can facilitate the preparation and guided processing with a clear plan

** Staff in the partnering agency/organization can become co-educators in the process, and thus this term need not only refer to the teacher or faith-community staff involved*

4. The organizations involved have an authentic partnership, in which clear communication takes place

5. The experience is intentionally connected to clearly defined "learning goals" and "impact* goals"

** It is not enough for the "learner" to have a meaningful experience; it is also essential that the activity positively affect the people/situation whom the learner encounters and works with*

6. There is some kind of "classroom component" that has content with depth (*see Appendix for additional perspectives*)

7. There is a continual process of guided reflection, on an informal as well as formal basis

8. The experience of service-learning should lead participants into a deeper awareness of and capacity for civic engagement; forms of engagement could include volunteering, grassroots organizing, advocacy, etc

9. The final stages of the service-learning experience includes a focus on providing closure and expressions of affirmation/appreciation/celebration.

Desirable factors

1. The orientation process used by the community partner may be somewhat distinct from that used for volunteers (e.g. one component would be "personal goal setting" by the learner)

2. The process of guided reflection in the final stages includes an effort to document and share the story with a wider audience (e.g. people in one's school/faith-community beyond their own class/program; the wider community; future participants in the same course/program)

Appendix

Re: linking "learning goals" and "service-activities"

One participant shared that in the service-learning experiences that she has had, the staff in community-based organizations have rarely supported exploration of the links between the service-activities they have given her to do and the courses she was in. ("It was as if the only thing they were concerned about was that I run the group they had given me.")

Re: the meaning of/need for a “classroom component”

We understood this term to refer to a variety of settings (e.g. a youth group or Confirmation/Bar Mitzvah program), not just a school classroom

Some participants have noted that service-learning is sometimes done through a school’s co-curricular organization or by work-study students.

The phrase “classroom component” is difficult to link to these approaches.

Re: the kinds of learner outcomes on which we need to focus

In both the Nov 7th and Feb 15th meetings, there has been talk about the importance of the attitudes of the people involved in the experience.

It is our sense that teachers, and even faith-community and community-organization staff, tend to feel more comfortable dealing with "knowledge" and "actions" -- yet all of us have had experiences where the attitudes of students (and others) played a critical role in either the success or failure of a service-learning experience.

Re: the meaning of “service”

It continues to be apparent that our focus is primarily on the “learning” side of the “service-learning” equation.

I believe this focus has significant value, and that some of the problems that we experience can be addressed by developing a clearer, more comprehensive understanding of this aspect of the meaning of service-learning.

However, I believe that it will be important for us to articulate a more clear and comprehensive understanding of the meaning of “service”.

- As I read over the list of essential factors, it’s not clear to me that any of them could not be applied equally to any kind of experiential learning. What, then, does it mean that the kind of learning process we’re describing is service-learning?
- When I think about the problems that coalition members have identified, some of them seem to emerge because participants may have ideas of what “service” means that are conflictual, even contradictory.
- The sharing that took place at the beginning of the Feb 15th meeting offered a variety of valuable ideas. I believe we could combine and add to them.