

## Teaching Skills Through Service Learning

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A sixth grade student stands in front of her class. She is describing ideas generated by her fellow classmates -- ideas that will help provide educational materials for low-income children living in San Bernardino County. She is calling for action.

“I went into this project feeling sympathetic,” she says, “but when I leave I want to feel empathetic. It’s time for us to stop talking and start doing.”

For the next three months, the sixth grade students at Carlthorp School took ownership of a service-learning project that placed them in the driver’s seat. They planned, compromised, adapted, learned from their mistakes, and ultimately delivered homemade ABC and 1,2,3 coloring books to a local Head Start program.

Although this accomplishment is inspiring, it only paints part of the picture. The real beauty of service learning resides in the empowerment it gives to students. They drive the project, often to unexpected heights and unforeseen outcomes, while gaining a variety of life skills: perseverance, problem solving, meeting management, community outreach, and critical thinking.

Service Learning in one word is *process*. From gaining awareness of and perspective on societal challenges, to reflection and educating future service leaders, the process is completely student-driven. They learn while leading.

One of the most common misconceptions of service learning is that it is the same as community service. Community service can take many different forms, ranging from penny drives, to making bag lunches for the homeless, to hour quotas for graduation. Oftentimes, students don’t get to choose how they become involved in service projects and have no opportunity to select one with personal impact. The purpose of this article is not to take away any value that community service provides. Many community service projects are important. However, we have come to realize that the fundamental difference between community service and service learning is how important *ownership* of both the project and the process is to the students. We have distinguished five key components of service learning that will be explained in more detail below.

Professional educators seek to develop learning experiences that meet the academic, social, and developmental needs of all the learners in a classroom. Just as the architect designs a blueprint for a building or a house, educators create learning experiences that outline the key features and non-negotiable elements of lessons. These features take into account the skills, concepts, and standards students should know and be able to demonstrate as well as their needs, interests, and abilities. The Common Core State Standards and the California Gifted and Talented Education Standards provide a comprehensive scope and sequence for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that students should master as they proceed through the K-12 public school system. Many different pedagogical practices, models of teaching, and instructional strategies exist in the literature and have been designed to enable implementation of both the CCSS and GATE standards. We contend that Service Learning can be added to the list of techniques that educators can employ as a means of achieving the non-negotiable standards and preparing students for thinking and learning in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century society. The following chart highlights the steps of Service Learning and the standards addressed in each stage of the process.

Steps of Service Learning	Alignment to CCSS	Alignment to GATE
Students gain awareness and perspective of societal challenges.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.1</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.2</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9</a>	Connection to Universal Concepts such as Power, Conflict, Change, etc.  <i>What larger ideas or themes reflect the community that you are a part of?</i>
Students link global and local challenges.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.2</a>	Connection to the prompts of Depth and Complexity.  <i>What patterns exist locally, nationally, and globally?</i>
Students focus on a local challenge and develop process for service project.	<a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1</a> <a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1</a>	Connection to the skills of critical thinking, creative thinking, and problem-solving.  <i>How can we prove with evidence that the problem is relevant?</i>

<p>Students, teachers, and experts partner to support and execute service project.</p>	<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.5</a></p> <p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4</a></p> <p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4</a></p> <p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6</a></p>	<p>Connection to Thinking Like a Disciplinarian</p> <p><i>From what perspectives can you approach the problem?</i></p>
<p>Students reflect and educate future service leaders.</p>	<p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.4</a></p> <p><a href="#">CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.SL.3</a></p>	<p>Connection to Big Ideas</p> <p><i>What are the key ideas that I have learned from my project?</i></p>

Students take their first step by gaining awareness and perspective of societal challenges. This is the point where you find an organic connection to your curriculum and the students' lives, to help pique their interest in the content. In our classrooms, this connection occurred when a parent gave us a book called *I Believe in Zero* by Caryl M. Stern. The book discusses many worldwide challenges we face today and, more specifically, how they affect children. Our 6<sup>th</sup> grade team decided to read the chapter about child laborers in Bangladesh because it complemented our studies of global civilizations and our students' long-term country reports. The students learned about the tedious work these children perform for 12-14 hours each day and the absolute poverty they live in, often with limited access to food, healthcare, and educational opportunities.

We asked our students, "Why do we care about this issue?" and "How does it affect us?" After reading the chapter, we also discussed the cycle of poverty and contrasted our lives in Santa Monica with these children in Bangladesh. By gaining awareness of these global challenges, the students felt a growing sense of responsibility to take action.

Elementary school students have an uncompromising sense of right and wrong. When presented with an injustice, they want to do something about it. As the students read about child labor in Bangladesh, we could see the fire igniting within them. They wanted to be an active player solving this problem. So we asked them, "Do you have to go all the way to Bangladesh to make a difference? Or, is there a problem within our own community that deserves our attention?"

The class then discussed three topics related to our local community: early childhood education, animal welfare, and the ongoing water crisis in California. Suddenly, these world problems didn't seem a thousand miles away. They were right outside our door. The link from global to local is immensely important for two reasons. First, it presents students with motivation to serve their local community in a tangible way. Second, the local context enables the teacher to transfer responsibility to the students.

The students are now ready to focus on a local challenge and develop a process for creating a service project. This step started off as an idea session that we conducted over two class periods, both in small groups and as a whole grade level. A variety of great ideas came out of these brainstorming sessions, one being a mobile library that would travel to children in need of educational materials. Students generated more ideas after a Save the Children ambassador came to speak with the group. This person was able to articulate specific needs and inspire more student ideas. One of the main challenges in early education that resonated with the students was the lack of books available in homes affected by poverty. In the end, the students decided they wanted to create small, handmade books that could help the children learn basics, like numbers, colors and letters. We called them ABC books. Although only 12 students were heavily involved in this project, we asked if each of our homerooms would design books to help contribute. Ultimately, about 40 books were created for these young children to help them with their educational needs.

Executing the service project was the moment the students had all been waiting for. They had completed their research; they had reached out to a local expert who could help guide them; they had assigned roles within their group, and they had a clear, organized plan.

Through our contact at Save the Children, we partnered with a Head Start program in San Bernardino, California. The students volunteered their own weekend to visit this school and deliver their homemade educational books. As we watched our students teach and play with these younger children, they too were receiving a special gift from the experience. They achieved empathy.

The last, and arguably the most important component, occurs after the students execute their project and then reflect and educate future service leaders. Reflection allows the students to think about what they learned from their hands-on experiences. Each of the two visits to San Bernardino ended with a reflection session during which the students had an opportunity to share what they learned with each other and the Save the Children leaders. They also had the opportunity to ask questions and plan how they would like to continue to foster a long-term relationship with the organization.

Upon returning to school, the sixth graders discussed their goal of continuing this partnership and agreed the information must be shared with the fifth grade classes. They created a PowerPoint presentation with pictures and information about their service-learning project. Later, they shared their personal stories and answered questions from the fifth graders. When we began to introduce potential service learning projects to our class this year, members of the original project came back to share their advice and listen to the new ideas. We are now working to cultivate service leaders within our school alumni, who will come back to both advise and inspire our current students.

Service learning is a long-distance race that is completed one small step at a time. It is a series of organic experiences that often lead from one to another. It requires flexibility, both for the students and the teacher. It is completely student driven and it is about making “mistakes” along the way and learning from them. To be completely honest, we do not know where these projects are going at the start of the unit. However, by having an open mind and taking a few risks, special opportunities will naturally present themselves.

For example, earlier this year, we heard an interview with a nationally renowned homeless expert named Robert Marbut. We forwarded the link of the interview to our students running the Anti-Homelessness group and simply said there might be some ideas here that you could use in your project. Apparently, they were thinking bigger! The students reached out to Mr. Marbut and he took an interest in their desire to help the local homeless population. On one of his recent trips to Los Angeles, he came to visit and personally answered questions the students drafted. We had no idea this connection would be a possibility; however, one event can organically lead to another, which leads to another and another.

The Anti-Homelessness group is also a great example of how important flexibility is in the service learning process. Homelessness wasn't one of the original topics introduced, but it shows the flexible thinking the students had to possess in order to put in the time to research this issue on a local and national level, and present to their teachers why they thought it was a valuable project to work on.

Flexibility also has to come from the teacher's end. We didn't plan to work on all of these topics with our students, but we were able to support this group of students when they proposed homelessness as a topic. Still, we understand how difficult this can be as a teacher. You have your schedule, set plans on what to teach when, and a limited amount of time to do it. While we were flexible with the direction in which our classroom projects were heading, we did find that we regularly had to circle back to our student-generated list of service project steps in order to make sure the students weren't missing anything vital.

The simple truth is this program does not belong to us; it belongs to the students. They form their service groups and elect their leaders. They organize and run their meetings. They reach out to community members who can assist their efforts. In essence, we, the teachers, have transferred complete control of the program to the students.

Let's be completely honest. At best, this transfer of power can feel uncomfortable. At worst, it can feel terrifying. What if the students make the wrong decision? Or, what if something goes wrong? Well, let's go ahead and save you the drama. They *WILL* make a wrong decision and something *WILL* go wrong! That is when the true learning occurs. As we all know, some of our greatest life lessons came from the times we skinned our knees and had to pick ourselves back up.

Although the students run this process, your role as the teacher, parent, or partner is to support. Give them the tools and materials, but let them build. Give them advice and suggestions when prompted, but let them decide. Give them the motivation to succeed, and also the courage to fail, learn, and try again.

A final point to emphasize is that service learning will include "mistakes." However, we view mistakes more like learning opportunities. This year alone we've taught our students many valuable life skills, such as how to prepare for a meeting, write a formal e-mail, maintain internet safety, best practices for interviewing, public speaking skills, and more. Interestingly, these skills were not originally on our radar when we started the program.

An example of these "mistakes" occurred earlier this year, when our students wrote an email (without our knowledge) to Mr. Marbut regarding his work with the homeless. After becoming aware of this e-mail, we spoke to our students about proofreading emails before sending them, and checking in with a teacher before e-mailing unknown adults. The best part of this however, was that the students received a response within two days. They were so excited that their action had resulted in a potential partner and consultant to their project.

In addition to fostering understanding and supporting our students' actions in the community, we teachers recognize that the most valuable experience is how to incorporate these important life lessons into our students' academic experiences. Leading a service learning project gives the students a powerful voice in their education and teaches them how to advocate for their community.

Looking ahead, the ultimate goal of our service-learning program is to empower our students by nurturing their confidence, motivation, and empathy. To repeat, we want them to have the courage to fail, learn from their mistakes, and try again.

Before our trip to visit the Head Start program in San Bernardino County, our principal received an email from a student that demonstrates the power of service learning.

“I have big hopes, big dreams, and a big future,” the student wrote. “All of that is meaningless unless I can share it with others whose hopes, dreams, and futures are squashed by the evil foot of poverty.”

That is confidence! That is motivation! That is empathy! That is the spark that makes a difference in this world.