

GETTING STARTED

AGENDA

- Choosing a Topic
- Project Examples
- Methods for Eliciting Student-Generated Topics
- Choosing a Project Topic
- Establishing Groups

Choosing a Topic

It is crucial for students to feel that the project is relevant to them. This fact should determine how the class is organized for the project and how the project topic is chosen. Be sure to consult school and district policies regarding projects, field trips, and student service activities—they may be relevant to the feasibility of certain projects.

This section describes methods for choosing a project topic, along with the pros and cons of each method.

Teacher-Generated Topics

If you know that you'll be facing especially stringent limitations on time and/or resources, generating a list of preapproved topics is one way to ensure that students are able to complete their projects. Offering possible ideas can also be used to inspire your group to create a list of its own.

If your class's service learning project is to be chosen from a list of topics that you generate, it is necessary that you do research. Look over the list of suggested topics on the next page, speak to other teachers, or contact local volunteer organizations for information on projects that other student groups have taken on. Before adding a topic to the list, consider your time and resource limitations, and determine whether a project is within the scope of those limitations.

District-Generated Topics

Some school districts consider service learning projects to be a part of their curricular (or extracurricular) goals. In some cases, this translates to plans, resources, and support that are already in place. There may be a list of potential projects that has been established and approved at the district level.

Though it's important to be attuned to students' choices, if plans and support are in place for a district-selected project, use them. There are ways of creatively introducing a preapproved project that will leave students feeling empowered and committed to the process (e.g., bring in a video clip that supports the need for a project to address a certain issue, play topic "Jeopardy" to reveal preapproved projects, record a plea for support). District personnel may be willing to speak to your students about the importance of the project they are undertaking and offer them encouragement.

Student-Generated Topics

Though this process requires a fairly well-developed level of communication among students, a student-generated project topic is ideal. When students choose to take on a project of their own creation, a strong sense of ownership is fostered, leading to greater student commitment to the project.

Because the best scenario includes students generating a list of project topics that interest them and then choosing the one(s) in which they're most interested, the success of this approach also depends on the initial commitment of students to take the process of generating and choosing topics seriously. If this is a potential issue in your classroom, bear in mind that student-chosen projects are the most empowering and successful, even if the choices themselves are generated by another method.

Project Examples

Encouraging your students to work on a service learning project of their own choosing is the best way to ensure that the project is relevant to them. Use the following list of potential service learning projects to spur students' thinking:

1. Students collect and distribute shoes and clothing to the homeless.
2. Students collect toys for foster children.
3. Students raise money for a nonprofit organization (e.g., National Urban League, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, ASPCA, American Cancer Society, Farm Aid).
4. Students write children's books and donate them to elementary schools.
5. Students clean up neighborhood parks.
6. Students create greeting cards for children in the hospital.
7. Students perform a play for senior citizens.
8. Students create a community garden in a vacant lot.
9. Students plan a holiday party for homeless children.

Methods for Eliciting Student-Generated Topics

A topic may be generated as a result of a catalytic event that takes place in the school or in the community, or an issue may emerge from an intense class discussion. Sometimes, the class must engage in a deliberate process in order to generate an appropriate project topic. The following are strategies to help students consider potential service learning project topics and methods to help you implement these strategies in your classroom.

Motivation through Inspiration

The work of others who have done service learning projects can provide you with a variety of resources to help the class generate topics.

To introduce your students to potential service learning projects, use articles, videos, and guest speakers who can share their community service experiences. Look for information on projects completed by public figures, including athletes and entertainers. Showing students what others have accomplished can inspire and enable them to generate at least one project idea that they'd be interested in trying themselves.

Use the internet to research information on the following organizations and events:

- All for Good—www.allforgood.org
- Youth Service America—www.ysa.org
- Do Something—www.dosomething.org
- The VH1 Save the Music Foundation—www.vh1savethemusic.com

Tackling the Tough Questions

Many of your students may never have been asked to offer their opinions on their school, their communities, or the portrayal of young people in the popular media. Pose questions such as the following to your students in order to generate discussions about these topics:

- What do you think are the “hot” issues in your community and in your school?
- What things do you wish were different in your community and in your school?
- How do you think people perceive your community and your school?
- How do you want people to perceive your community and your school?
- How do you think most people perceive adolescents? Do you think that their perceptions are accurate?
- What would you change about the way you, as young people, are perceived?

During this discussion, focus on the issues instead of jumping straight to identifying a topic. Giving your students time to discuss what they think is happening in the world will assist you in your efforts to excite them about the ensuing project.

The following is an example of how this discussion might play out in the classroom:

- What are the “hot” issues in your community? (*Students might respond: people don’t get along or don’t like to come to our town.*)
- More specifically, who doesn’t get along? (*Students might mention people from different generations or different ethnicities.*)
- How can we address this? (*Students might respond: break down stereotypes, improve communication.*)
- What are some ways that we can break down stereotypes? (*Students might respond: visit a local senior citizens center, arrange a multicultural event.*)
- Which senior centers can we visit?
- Which of these is easiest to get to?
- Are they willing to work with us? How can we find out?

The result of this discussion will essentially be a list of issues that concern your students. Once these issues are identified, it's time to move from the general to the specific, to consider each issue and the options that exist, and to address the issues within your community. Ask the class to gather information on the options, whom they can work with, where they can go, and what they can do to address these issues.

At the end of this process, you'll have a detailed list of service learning project options generated by the brainstorming session or by examining what others have done. Over the course of the discussion, it may have become clear that interest in some topics was low. Perhaps one project naturally emerged as your students' first choice. Maybe there are a variety of viable options, in which case it's time to make some decisions.

Choosing a Project Topic

The decision making process will go smoothly if you establish some rules that will govern it. For example, consider whether the decision will be made by consensus or by majority rule. If you choose to employ the latter, discuss the importance of students' commitment to whatever project is chosen, even if the topic isn't the one for which they most strongly advocated.

You may also use a combination of the majority rule and consensus methods: first narrow the project topic options with a consensus vote, then take a vote by majority rule to determine the final topic.

As the decision making process evolves, consider the grouping and organization options that were outlined in section 1 of this module. For example, if it seems as though choosing one project is becoming too divisive to ensure a successful outcome, you may wish to consider organizing students into two different groups focused on two different projects.

Establishing Groups

By now, your students have chosen to work as a whole group on one project, in small groups on different projects, or individually on different projects. If the decision making process dictated the formation of project groups or individual projects, move on to the contract stage. If your whole class will work on the same project, work with your students to form the small groups that will concentrate on planning different aspects of the project.

Groups can be formed in a variety of ways:

- **Random:** Assign students to groups based on birthday month, names that fall between two letters of the alphabet, who is wearing a certain color—anything that randomly assigns students to a particular group. Though students may balk at being separated from their friends, this method ensures that students are working with others with whom they may not normally interact.
- **Assigned:** Assign particular students to particular groups. This gives you a chance to consider students' various strengths and weaknesses, and to group students who you believe may work well together and will learn well from one another. However, assigned groups may breed a sense of injustice among students who want to work specifically with their friends.
- **Self-selected:** Allow students to form their own groups. Generally the most popular choice among young people, this method of organization can alleviate feelings of discomfort that some students feel when working with classmates whom they don't know. However, this option can breed or enhance a sense of cliquishness among students who have fewer friends. You may wish to allow students the opportunity to go by their task preferences when they choose their groups. This may reduce the likelihood that students will form groups composed only of friends.

Consider your particular students and the dynamics of your class, and choose the grouping method that you believe will lead to the most successful overall experience for your students. Whatever method you choose, encourage each group to create rules and to discuss expectations of members' participation, division of work, commitment, and the like. Formalize these discussions in the student contracts.

After students have chosen a topic and formed groups, have them create and sign project contracts.