

INTRODUCTION

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About Service Learning

Motivated young people who have been prepared for life in the world beyond school are most likely to succeed when they begin their first jobs or start college. The key to this preparedness is ensuring that they learn the skills necessary for success in a context that is relevant to them. Providing such an experience while they are in school can be a challenge.

A service learning project is an opportunity to address this challenge. Students put their life skills into practice as they work to fulfill a goal that has relevance and meaning to them. Neither the size nor the scope of the service learning project is critical to its worth—rather, it is the dedication and commitment that students make to fulfilling the project's goals that make it successful. The opportunities in a service learning project for students to apply and practice their communication, time management, goal setting, and decision making skills are of paramount importance.

Many experts consider adolescence to be the ideal time to foster the desire to help others. During adolescence, young people tend to be idealistic and think about ways to make a difference in the world. Developing and carrying out a service learning project satisfies many needs, including the need to belong, the need to be recognized, the need for diverse experiences with clear boundaries and structure, and the need for self-exploration. Students who participate in service learning projects are impacting the world in which they live in a manner of their own choosing. These students experience the powerful feelings of connectedness and satisfaction that come from working with others to fill a need in their communities.

Organizing a class of adolescents into a goal-oriented, detail-focused project team may seem like a daunting task. This module provides a comprehensive plan for developing a successful service learning project. It outlines the steps, lists the materials and tools, and offers suggestions and resources that will help you engage your students in a meaningful project.

We suggest that you read the entire module and all the lessons before you start this project in your classroom. Do some preliminary planning. Discuss what you have read and what you plan to do with others in your school. By doing these things, you will give yourself the firm foundation you need to launch your service learning project.

Service Learning: A Closer Look

Defining “Service Learning”

Service learning is an educational process through which students learn by participating in a project that meets a need in their communities. It should be integrated into and enhanced by specific academic courses within your school's curriculum. In a service learning project, academic skills are applied to meet a community need. “Service” and “learning” are complementary—the service aspect makes the learning relevant to students' lives and increases student motivation.

Service Learning vs. Community Service

Many students equate service learning with community service. The commonalities between the two start and end with the word “service.” The major distinction between the two is that service learning is facilitated by a teacher and carried out by students who are actively learning; the learning and the service are equally important. Community service is carried out by a group of people who are contributing to the improvement of their surroundings. Clarifying the two terms for your students will allow them to gain an appreciation for service learning and to recognize how this project will allow them to apply the skills they are learning in school.

The Benefits of Service Learning

Students, schools, and communities all benefit from service learning projects. The table on page 3 lists a few of those benefits. Throughout the service learning experience, you and your students will discover many more benefits than those listed.

Scheduling

A service learning project is completed through a three-step process:

1. Planning and preparation
2. Action
3. Reflection

It is a simple design that’s fairly easy to execute, particularly if you choose the method of scheduling that works best for you and your students. Two scheduling possibilities are outlined below.

Weaving a Service Learning Project into the Overcoming Obstacles Curriculum

The service learning project is designed to integrate with the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum. The project enables students to apply and demonstrate the skills taught in the various modules and lessons. In this way, Overcoming Obstacles becomes a project based curriculum in which the skills taught are immediately applied to an experience outside of school, resulting in more effective learning, a better understanding, and an internalization of the skills.

In weaving the service learning project into the course, it is preferable that the project’s topic be identified early. This requires a certain degree of initial interest and commitment from your students. Some classes become a cohesive group from the onset, and the necessary level of commitment naturally results. In other cases, it takes more time. Don’t worry and don’t force it—if you’re weaving the service learning project into the curriculum, your commitment, momentum, and enthusiasm will carry you through until the group becomes cohesive and develops interest in the project.

BENEFITS OF A SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT

Students

- Students form or strengthen connections to their communities.
- Students learn tolerance by working with different people, organizations, or causes.
- Students practice teamwork by joining efforts with others to create a positive impact on their communities.
- Students apply their academic knowledge and skills to the project; these skills become increasingly relevant to their lives, making school more exciting.

Community

- The community develops a sense of pride in students involved in the project.
- Community members, who may not have the opportunity otherwise, experience positive interaction with young people.
- The community sees that the school uses resources effectively.

Schools

- When a school supports the efforts of the community, it will experience an improvement in community relations.
- Service learning empowers and motivates students to make a positive impact in their schools.
- Teachers who strive to make education relevant to students' lives and assist them in positively impacting their communities foster a better rapport with their students.

Concluding the Overcoming Obstacles Curriculum with a Service Learning Project

The service learning project complements the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum, as students must apply the skills they've learned during the course. This scheduling method can be useful if your students need a more substantial amount of time to develop a group identity or to become comfortable with the Overcoming Obstacles classroom environment.

The Bottom Line in Scheduling

Whether your class undertakes the service learning project simultaneously with or at the conclusion of the course, the steps of the process outlined throughout this module are the same. Choose the schedule that allows your students to benefit the most from the service learning experience.

Organizing the Work

Just as you have some flexibility in scheduling the project, there are options for organizing students to carry out the work. Consider your students as individuals and as a group, and choose the method of organization that works best for your class.

Whole-Class Project

Enlisting the entire class to work on one big project can foster a strong sense of teamwork and commitment in a classroom. Whole-class projects may be larger in scope than projects in which students work individually or in small groups.

The most effective way to organize a whole-class project is to encourage students to form small groups, each of which is responsible for one aspect of the project. This encourages interaction between students who may not normally work together without causing them to feel that they are being separated from their friends. Many teachers find it easier to track the details for one big project than for a variety of individual or small-group projects.

Whole-class projects have a way of internally addressing the issue of individual responsibility. While each small group is responsible for one aspect of the project, each student is accountable to the larger group, which is depending on the completion of the smaller tasks. This helps to keep commitment and interest high even when students are encountering obstacles. The tracking sheet introduced in this section demonstrates the “paper trail” that each student will create in order to detail their work. This system of documentation allows students to assume appropriate responsibility for the completion of the project.

Small-Group or Partner Projects

Encouraging partners or small groups of students to work on different projects is an excellent way to address differing student interests. If students cannot agree on a whole-class project, small-group projects can mean the difference between commitment and resentment.

However, small-group projects usually necessitate limiting the scope of each one. Tracking the progress of many small-group projects can be difficult for the teacher because more projects mean more details. It is also important to consider that small-group projects will not generate a sense of teamwork within the whole class.

On the other hand, strong facilitation and thorough preparation can result in groups that compare notes and work collaboratively to help one another address issues and pitfalls as they arise.

Individual Projects

Individual student projects may arise out of a student's journal writings or meetings with a teacher in which the student expresses a commitment to a particular project topic. An individual project can be especially empowering for students who feel that one person can't make a difference. It can foster an increased sense of responsibility and commitment to a goal.

The drawbacks of individual projects are essentially the same as those outlined for small-group projects: limited scope and limited opportunities to practice teamwork skills. While this can actually make it easier for you to assess the projects, tracking the details may be difficult.

Time and Resource Management—The Paper Trail

Setting up record-keeping systems before the planning stages begin is crucial. In a process that has many steps, having good records of what's been done, by whom, and when will help you and your students to feel more in control and more relaxed.

Included in this module are activity sheets that you can use to create your "paper trail." Descriptions of each are below.

The Contract

Formalizing students' participation in the project with a written contract is a proactive way to ensure that they will be seriously engaged in the process. While the project should be fun and interesting, it is also a serious undertaking. A service learning project is reciprocal, meaning that people are expecting the students to follow through on the service that they've agreed to provide. In that respect, it's like a job (a parallel you may wish to highlight); when people agree to provide a service, they often formalize that agreement with a written contract.

A sample contract is provided in this module, but the contract that you use must be pertinent to your students' projects. One way to ensure relevance is to guide students to write their own contracts. Most importantly, the contract should state the students' agreement to undertake the project seriously, to meet commitments fully and on time, and to see the project through to its completion. Contracts should be signed by students, by you, and by another student acting as a "witness." File one copy of the signed contract and give another copy to the student who signed it.

Time Management

A blank tracking sheet is included with this module. This sheet will allow you and your students to stay organized, keep track of the work that's been done and that needs to be done, and adhere to a schedule. In addition, this tracking sheet will help students to practice crucial time-management skills, such as keeping a personal schedule and accounting for their work. The sheet should also help you to easily evaluate your students' work throughout the process instead of assessing them only at the project's completion. After all, the process is as important as the result—during the planning of the project, students must regularly demonstrate the life and job skills that they've learned throughout the Overcoming Obstacles lessons.

There are several options that exist for tracking students' progress. Project journals may be used, for example. Weekly progress reports can also be used in conjunction with the tracking sheet; the reports may also eliminate the need for the sheet. Whether you choose to use a tracking sheet or not, students should be reminded of how to create and use a to-do list in order to complete tasks.

Planning—A Guide and Checklist

The remainder of this module details the steps to facilitating a service learning project. It includes lessons that you can use to help your students complete these steps. It also includes activity sheets that you can copy and distribute to aid students with completing the project.

As mentioned previously, the goal of this module is to provide you with a step-by-step guide to navigating the service learning project process. We have created a checklist/guide that corresponds to each step outlined in the module. Although it does not offer the detail and resources that you'll find within the module, it is a useful tool for charting your class's progress and judging where you are—and where you are headed next—in the service learning process. We've designed the checklist so that it can be photocopied and slipped into your plan book or hung on a bulletin board near your desk.