

## 1995 International Conference on Volunteer Administration

# How to Make Service into Service Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*The traditional placing of students in non-profit organizations for a few required hours to get a taste of volunteerism, while still in place in many school districts, is giving way to service by students designed to enrich their academic course work. For the volunteer administrator this requires new considerations for volunteer student placements in order to enrich both those being served and the student volunteers.*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a wonderful change taking place in student volunteer work in traditional service organizations. Some might call it a true paradigm shift.

In the past, teachers did not ask their students to make any connection between their volunteer service experiences and their academic course work. This meant that volunteer administrators did not have to concern themselves with linking service activities to academic pursuits. Generally they were asked only to comment on the quality of a student's service and on whether each student had fulfilled his/her time requirement.

Now a growing number of schools and colleges want today's service learning experience for students to be part and parcel of academic course work.

Twenty years ago almost no colleges or universities asked students to write essays about their volunteer work, nor did they place student volunteer work high on their list of acceptance criteria. This is not so today. It is a well-accepted bit of college-prep folk wisdom that if there are two students matched academically, with comparable scores on national standard-

ized tests, and one has done some service learning while the other has not, the student with service experience has the edge.

Volunteer supervisors in health facilities have long noted that children who volunteer in their institutions (visiting with the residents, drawing pictures for them, assisting them in the recreation areas, recording their oral histories, etc.) have not been directed by their teachers to connect what they learn in the health facility with what they are reading in their health texts during the regular school day. Instead most health teachers have treated student volunteer time in a health facility as a "learning to serve" experience, period. These teachers have not treated volunteer service as a time for their pupils to test theories they have read as homework, discussed in class or heard in classroom lectures.

Today volunteer administrators are discovering that even primary school pupils expect to learn something about how the health facility operates, and how the residents are cared for. The students want interactions with the residents to "make a difference." Once back at school the pupils know that health teachers expect them to have learned something about

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health care, and to have observed the impact their volunteer assignment has had on the organization and its clients.

A 7th grade student who spends an hour a week at a nursing home for the elderly—and usually is assigned to a recreation area to play Chinese checkers with residents—is expected to note if the residents remember how to play the game from week to week, and if playing it helps them remain mentally alert.

In addition to reading about memory loss in class, health teachers may ask their students to observe the elderly whom they see during their weekly volunteer visits, and participate in class discussions, sharing anecdotal evidence about their visits.

## SOME EXAMPLES OF SERVICE LEARNING

### *Learning a foreign language*

Service learning calls for volunteer administrators to make assignments for students that are not only appropriate for their age and experience level, but also supportive of their academic course work. Using volunteer time to support the study of a second language is an obvious example. Here the volunteer administrator pairs students with those who would welcome helping them learn another language. While one native French-speaking (or Spanish-speaking) resident of a veteran's hospital might enjoy sharing a foreign-language video with an advanced language student in order to discuss it in the "second" language, another might be more comfortable sharing simple children's poems and stories with students just beginning the study of the language.

Volunteer administrators can help set up pen-pal relationships with residents for foreign-language students. They can also suggest that a phone-pal arrangement might better serve the needs of the bed-bound while at the same time providing foreign-language students an opportunity to hear and respond to a native speaker.

Meanwhile the foreign language teacher might expect students to turn in papers and tapes that translate interactions during the volunteer assignments into both English and the foreign language. Perhaps the second year French student would write a letter in French about Halloween to imaginary relatives in the south of France. Or, if preferable, students might want to write to a native French speaker at the local veteran's home. The language teacher might say, "If you get a letter back from your friend in the veteran's home, you can translate it [into English or French], and hand it in for extra credit." Warning: The volunteer administrator must be alert to an overload on a friendly and garrulous veteran by several eager students!

Let's consider another situation where high school students learning French volunteer at a veteran's hospital. An 11th grade student is taking third-year French. She is expected to improve her written French and her ability to translate from French into English and vice versa. The volunteer administrator knows a French speaking veteran who dearly needs and craves companionship, but who is severely deaf. The volunteer administrator thinks this is a good match. The student can share French translations from class with the veteran. He can respond in writing. Other veterans may be physically disabled and unable to write, but able to hear and speak clearly. Students could converse with these residents, practicing oral expression and developing vocabulary in the process.

The wise volunteer administrator will make sure that the interested residents spend time with the French-language students when they perform skits, sing songs, recite poetry, and engage in folk dancing. These events take place at school with the residents coming to the school. Or the school or a volunteer organization may be the transportation provider to get the students to the facility. All the residents, not just those for whom French is their native language, get a chance to enjoy the students and the cultural enrichment.

Those who have seen service learning know how students enrich the lives of long-term care residents and recognize that the quality of life for the residents dramatically improves. For the students, what was once a "chore" or "do-gooding" becomes a true learning experience. For the student, talking about one of Guy de Maupassant's essays with a native French-speaking, wheel chair-bound veteran (in French), and laughing together over his exploits, beats reading the essay alone and trying to translate it precisely with only a dictionary for help. One can easily assume that senior citizens are immensely buoyed knowing they can help their young friends not just with vocabulary, but also with insights about French culture.

One can similarly imagine the fun the student can have with his or her language pal. The youngster might arrange to have a birthday cake baked for his language pal by a home economics class, and ask a choir group to sing popular French songs in celebration. Perhaps the young language pal will want to write a puppet play, getting a craft class to make the puppets, and asking classmates to participate in the dialogue. The students can present the puppet play twice: once in French, the second time in English, taping the performance and receiving a translation grade from the language teacher for the quality of the work.

#### *A History Lesson*

While the impetus for using service experiences to enrich the curriculum should rightly come from teachers, volunteer administrators may be in a stronger position to know what service learning experiences would best serve not only their clients, but also their institutions. An example:

The volunteer administrator at one small rural nursing home within walking distance of the local elementary school had a brainstorm one day about how to raise the interest and activity level of the residents while enriching the lessons of the 5th grade class at the same time. The

class was studying the Civil War. Some of the residents actually knew people who participated in that war. The volunteer administrator asked the teacher if the students would like to record the nursing home residents' recollections of what they had been told about the Civil War.

Thus began a series of tape recordings about historic events. Students wrote reports in booklet format incorporating the residents' comments. When the class began studying the era of the Great Depression in the United States they discovered all of their nursing home friends had been affected. They even found the residents had opinions about the Beatles!

For students, the opportunity to do primary research was invaluable for scholarly growth. For the nursing home residents, personal histories grew in richness because of student interest. The volunteer administrator gained satisfaction from developing a more active environment for the residents.

The teacher recognized that the children's visits were always special events, times of happiness for the residents. She was astonished at how much more productive the history sessions were after the children had listened to the taped recollections and written their booklets. The students wanted to know more. They were full of questions, keenly interested in hearing the residents' personal histories. Awkwardness disappeared as the children and the residents discovered common interests.

Residents who could, read the booklets before the children arrived. In other cases the children came prepared to read portions of their booklets to the residents. The students received more praise than criticism and learned to ask better questions. The residents worked hard to remember not only what had happened, but its impact on them at the time.

#### OTHER OPPORTUNITIES FOR SERVICE LEARNING

Teachers who never thought that volunteer service time was anything but "learn-

ing-to-serve" time are recognizing that they have missed some golden opportunities to help students who are the types of learners who thrive when what they do correlates with what they study.

Let's look at this new way of viewing student community service from a teacher's point of view.

#### **The Typing Teacher in the Business Skills Class**

- The pupils need to learn how to create mailing labels. Almost every non-profit agency needs up-to-date mailing lists and must generate new mailing labels.
- The pupils need "letter-perfect" practice writing text material. All non-profit agencies need letters processed and directed to multiple audiences.

#### **The English Composition Teacher**

- The students need practice summarizing material in news form. Almost every non-profit agency needs shortened, summarized articles for newsletters.
- The students must learn how to take oral data and transfer this information to the written essay form. Almost every non-profit agency preserves historical data for its clients.

#### **The English Literature Teacher**

- The students must read serious literature and be able to discuss it with familiarity. Most residents in senior centers, nursing homes, hospices, and the like love to review a classic text, and welcome the opportunity to talk over meanings and impressions with new readers.

#### **The History (Social Studies) Teacher**

- The students need to serve as historians as well as read what historians have written. Every senior residence has oral history waiting to be recorded and processed.

#### **The Chemistry Teacher**

- The students need to learn the difference between the physical characteristics of potable and polluted water. Every residential facility needs to have its water supply checked for potability.

#### **The Math Teacher**

- The students need to know how to synthesize relationships in understandable charts and graphs. Every non-profit organization's annual report needs explanatory charts and graphs.

#### **CONCLUSION**

All of the service learning experiences described in this article give new duties to volunteer administrators. There is not much literature about service learning. Most volunteer administrators find they have to "play it by ear." All report that since service for learning is new to teachers, finding placements for the student volunteers almost always has to be done on an individual basis taking into account each student's needs, abilities, and maturity.

While service learning appears to enrich all involved, it takes time and creativity on the part of the volunteer administrator to carry out and coordinate. Service learning requires finding out a great deal about those being served, and those wanting to serve so that the experience is positive for both.