

[News and Hot Topics](#) » The Separation of Service-learning from
Volunteering...and Does It Matter?

The Separation of Service-learning from Volunteering...and Does It Matter?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

August
2009

The United States is in the midst of the Obama Administration's "[United We Serve](#)" Summer of Service, urging volunteer activities of all sorts, culminating on September 11th. This effort has its own "branding" and momentum. So I was dismayed to discover that the "National Learn and Service Challenge," slated for October 5-11, is being publicized with no visible connection to what the rest of the nation is doing before then.

Since school is out and the Summer of Service campaign was only officially announced in June, it's understandable that curriculum-based service needed a later timeframe. But why no cross linking and acknowledgement? Young people do all sorts of volunteering outside of school. Yet we persist in this total separation – and, in some cases, elevation – of service-learning over volunteering.

Following a long tradition of experiential education,¹ most service-learning programs today were conceived as *school reform* efforts, giving students the chance to practice or apply what they have learned in the classroom in the real world. Therefore, they were developed by educators with a total focus on curriculum relevance. Certainly there was interest in offering students useful work to do in the community, but rarely were the agencies who would be the hosts of these students asked about what types of help were needed. Further, little thought was given to any "downside" to the idea of using the community as an extension of the classroom. If anything, teachers took the attitude that agencies should welcome any type of student, whether out of civic obligation or because this would be a "free" worker.

The Great Divide

So we evolved service-learning as a world unto itself, completely divorced from the emerging field of volunteer management. Educators and volunteer program leaders speak only to their peers without realizing that both could benefit from interaction with the other. Consider:

- Both worlds have evolved their own professional tools without cross-fertilizing. Practitioners go to different conferences, read different books and journals, visit different Web sites. It is rare to see a citation or link pass across the divide.
- Too much of the literature written by educators creates a false hierarchy, at least from the community's perspective. Three descending levels of service are identified. The top is "service-learning," because it is curriculum based. Next comes "community service," which can be done as an extra-curricular activity, but possibly qualify for any compulsory pre-graduation requirement. And at the bottom is "volunteering," which is generally defined (dismissed?) as "unpaid helping."
- The Corporation for National and Community Service (The Corporation) has an entire division called Learn and Serve America, but they do not connect the dots themselves. When was the last time we in volunteerism heard anything about it? At the state level, the Commissions charged with spending The Corporation's grant money on AmeriCorps or RSVP are often not making decisions about service-learning grants. In Pennsylvania, for example, these are administered directly by the Department of Education with zero communication about their work outside of school circles. Note that the Learn and Serve Challenge I mentioned at the beginning is actually *run by* The Corporation, yet not a single link on the site connects back to United We Serve or non-education resources.
- We have allowed service-learning to disassociate itself from volunteering step by step. For example, not wanting to be a part of National Volunteer Week, proponents of what was National (and now [Global Youth Service Day](#)) scheduled itself on purpose on the Friday before the other celebration. From the National Conference on Volunteering and Service, through state conferences on volunteering, to local associations of volunteer program managers, educators who send students into the community are conspicuous by their absence. Once only was I invited to speak at the National Youth Leadership Conference and my workshop topic was "Words Apart or Worlds Apart?" There were over 500 people at the event and about 17 showed up for my session – every one of them from a nonprofit agency.

This divide exists beyond the United States, though in some countries it is the volunteer community spearheading the drive to incorporate service-learning into school curricula.

So What?

Maybe there is nothing wrong with this state of affairs and clearly very few people are talking about it. But here is why it troubles me:

1. To give students the best service-learning experience requires a *partnership* between the teacher and the person in the agency working with the student. So, on the front line where it matters most, it takes more than educators to make it work. When and how do teachers learn about how community agencies operate? How do agency staff learn what students need from them to learn most effectively? What takes precedence: service or learning? From the

agency's perspective, the answer will always be *service*. Do teachers know the difference and why it matters?

2. It is often argued that service-learning is civics education. The goal is to make young people recognize the role that an active citizen can and should play and to create a "lifelong tradition of service." Since service-learning is always done by students, but volunteering is done by everyone, isn't it contradictory to denigrate the latter as simply "unpaid helping"? Are we really teaching young people to understand the importance and scope of the volunteering they will be able to do all their lives – both activism and hands-on services?
3. The conduit, or entrance point, for students to find an agency placement is most often the volunteer office. Who else is able to interview unpaid, part-time workers, match them with appropriate assignments, give them an orientation, and monitor their progress? And, as often happens, when a student wants to continue a placement long after the connection to the classroom has ended, who else has a way to allow them to stay on officially? Do they somehow transmute from a "student" to a "volunteer," or is there more the same than different here?
4. Who is gathering data on the contributions to the community of students in service-learning assignments? Do they show up on the surveys of who volunteers? Are we sure? Do agencies report on them with or separate from adult (or even young) volunteers?
5. Why can't teachers and agency representatives learn from each other, through the student placement? Agency staff can be an important resource for new teaching materials and information; educators can help an agency consider its learning environment for all constituents.

There are, of course, special considerations for students seeking service-learning placements. They need to articulate learning goals and be matched to work that gives them a chance to meet those. They need a supervisor who explains things and is encouraging. They need to be integrated into the agency during the short span of a few weeks in which they will do their work. But all of this is simply extra attention to what's necessary for *any* volunteer. Indeed, maybe our non-student volunteers would appreciate exactly the same attention!

Whose responsibility is it to try to make a connection between these two worlds? Perhaps volunteer program managers should seek out service-learning administrators/educators in their communities as a first step towards bridging the gap.

- *Do you agree that there is a serious divide between service-learning and volunteering?*
- *Is it right or wrong or in-between?*
- *What can we do about it, at least locally?*

Related Topics: [Children and Teens](#) | [Students in Service](#) | [Service-Learning](#) | [Definitions of "Volunteer"](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#) | [Trends and Issues](#) | [Profession of Volunteer Management](#)

Submitted 12 August 2009 by Lucas Meijs, Rotterdam School of Management, the Netherlands

I propose to start seeing service learning as one of the modules of what I would call "involved

learning". Involved learning encompasses situations in which an explicit learning objective is linked to volunteering. Other modules are or can be for example: corporate volunteering, social activation, volunteering as integration tool and active aging.

In early 2009 Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University and the City of Rotterdam (the Netherlands) together organized an invitational conference on this issue. Participants agreed that specifically seen from the nonprofit agency perspectives there should be possibilities of achieving synergy in the different programs.

Submitted 5 August 2009, Anonymously

Here at the Forest Preserve District as the Volunteer Supervisor (yes I am paid that is my title), I am encouraged to say that volunteering with an educational component is alive and well. Whenever I get the opportunity to work with teachers to have students volunteer I try to make the experience relevant to the subject matter at hand. Sometimes the teachers are merely looking for the 'Green Living' component and then the opportunities may not match subject matter. Regardless every effort is made to add educational value to volunteering. Students tend to return if they know why they are doing something and can buy in.

Submitted 4 August 2009, Anonymously

I have worked in the service learning field for ten years and I agree with many of Susan's points that as the field has developed, it has been with a focus on school based service learning. However, I take issue with Susan's portrayal of the issue in an "us" (volunteer coordinators/organizations) vs. "them" (schools) manner. I also do not agree with her characterization of service learning vs. volunteering.

The bottom line is this: in the majority of cases, service learning requires both a school and community based partner that are well versed in service learning (I say majority because it is possible for a school or an organization to implement service learning independently). In fact, the recently released Standards for Quality Practice include "Partnerships" as one of the eight standards. They also include "Meaningful Service" and "Link to Curriculum". The problem I have run into in my years of trying to engage both schools and organizations is that they don't understand one another. Yes, the statement that "From the agency's perspective, the answer [as to whether service or learning takes precedence] will always be service." is true. Just as it is true that from the school's perspective, the answer will always be learning. The beauty of service learning is that by involving both perspectives, the students receive the best benefit. They become active participants in their own education that is relevant not when they graduate, but now and they begin to understand the vastness of the nonprofit sector and the role they can play in it. And, by involving both perspectives and including a deliberate emphasis on learning, the students are doing something different than volunteering. Not better than volunteering; different.

"Learning" in service learning means just that; rarely does an organization involve volunteers without providing them with some education. It doesn't have to mean "curricular standards". Unless, the organization wants to partner with a school. That is a simple reality. Teachers and administrators are

under immense pressure to demonstrate that everything they do connects to state standards. Rather than criticize the different approaches of schools and organizations, why not celebrate the strengths that each partner brings and focus on working together rather than making it “us” vs. “them”? The focus should be about how service learning occurs (again, see the Standards for Quality Practice), not where it occurs.

Submitted 4 August 2009 by Joy Des Marais, Globe University/MN School of Business, Brooklyn Center, MN USA

I agree wholeheartedly with this issue which is why, as a college educator and service-learning practitioner, I also participated in the certificate in volunteer leadership training offered by MAVA (MN). I can easily speak to both educators and nonprofit professionals about service-learning and what it means for them AND the perspective of the "other." Have others invited educators to participate in their activities?

Submitted 4 August 2009 by Randi Gonzalez, Volunteer Coordinator at Cabrillo Marine Aquarium and Board Member of DOVIA-LA, Los Angeles, CA USA

Service hours can be a valuable tool that may inspire an otherwise disengaged student to volunteer on their own or be made aware of possible career choices. But are students who are required to complete service-learning or community service hours truly volunteers? Some students do become regular volunteers and we welcome them into our programs with great success. Most don't continue beyond their basic requirement.

My experience is that many students don't know why they have to do hours. Students call, “I have to do service hours and I've chosen your place.” Many do not know how many hours are required, when the deadline is for completion and is there any specific type of work they can't do (e.g., stuffing envelopes) or what type of experience they need to fulfill class requirements.

There are so many facets to academic service hours – parent involvement (too much/too little); rote assignments; arbitrary number of hours assigned. Why aren't students given time during school hours to provide service if it's that important to the curriculum?

This is a topic that never seems to be far away when volunteer managers get together.

Submitted 4 August 2009 by Val Rogers, Volunteer Coordinator, Friends of Buford Park & Mt. Pisgah, Eugene, OR, USA

As Volunteer Coordinator for a small non-profit working in the field of native habitat conservation, I have observed a trend of increasing numbers of K-12 students seeking "service-learning" opportunities at our local nature reserve. We offer the kind of hands-on activities (removing invasive weeds, propagating native plants) that can accommodate large numbers and hence have become a popular site for short visits by these groups. However, I often have little or no meaningful contact with teachers and so must assume that they are following through with linking the service to learning objectives.

I feel at a disadvantage when seeking funding from grants that support service learning because our agency doesn't do curriculum. We're simply the site where the service takes place. Yet running a successful and productive outdoor service project in a short timeframe with dozens of students takes a lot of staff preparation and support. We need to be supported as the community partners providing meaningful service opportunities to students.

Submitted 4 August 2009 by Jo Ella Barrie, Nevada Volunteers AmeriCorps VISTA, Reno, NV USA

At Nevada Volunteers, we do have a foot in both worlds and we welcome great ideas that we can use to bridge the gap between service-learning and community agencies. I am wrapping up my final weeks as an AmeriCorps VISTA at Nevada Volunteers where my focus was on promoting both service-learning and youth volunteerism in all its forms. Now, because of a Congressionally Directed Grant, I will be staying on as a staff member to promote service-learning on Nevada's College Campuses. Since we are not housed in a higher education institution and we are a state with limited infrastructure around both service-learning and volunteerism, we have decided our strength begins with our great community partners and our work in volunteer management. We hope to act as a broker for bringing together community agencies, educators and Nevada college students to explore the very issues you have raised in this topic. We'll be happy to let you know how it goes! You can find us at www.nevadavolunteers.org

Submitted 4 August 2009, by an anonymous volunteer manager, OH, USA

Susan, you are right on target with this topic! I recently attended a service learning conference where agency volunteer administrators were invited to attend alongside educators. I found the conference material more focused toward an educator's viewpoint. I did raise the point at the conference that while linking learning to the service is wonderful, it does not add as much value to the community if it is not linked with the actual needs of the community. Who better to know about real community service needs than the volunteer administrators who are on the front lines of service delivery?

In my opinion, working with volunteer administrators and determining community needs should be the first step in developing a service learning project.

Submitted 3 August 2009 by H. Roberts, PLNJ Inc. - Blankie Depot, Keyport, NJ, USA

Susan, I think the time has come for VRM's across the country/globe to organize a full scale VRM Conference. 3 days of non stop VRM policy making and professional public education. One clear & concise opportunity to stand tall. Let everyone else take notes for a change!

The current state of service learning programs is only one, albeit large, example of why the profession is slipping through our well heeled, highly educated, busy hands.

VRM's should be drafting invitations, cultivating and booking speaker bureaus, constructing innovative workshops and shouting overdue consensus' of opinion; taking a proactive and instrumental role in this profession. Nothing will change if we continue to discuss but do little to

challenge. Worse yet, are we guilty of self serving solutions, rarely exhausting our collective wisdom. VRM's need to rally more often and get worked up!

We all read the same news items. This profession is picked over and often apart at the exclusion of the very pros working in the field. Continued misinformation and mis representation will only fail us. All of us.

Why do we settle for third-party relevance? Why are we surprised by the latest "makeover" when our ever-changing, service-providing industry is hijacked without our front and center input.

There are plenty of conferences covering VRM topics but how often do VRM's initiate these opportunities? If VRM's are more than a volunteerism topic (and we are!) what are we waiting for?

PRIVACY STATEMENT

Energize, a program of Adisa <https://adisagroup.com/>

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025