Service Learning: A View from the Inside
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Service learning is a type of experiential instructional methodology that combines standards based learning with meaningful service-oriented community activities. It is learning by doing, which not only provides instruction but does so through application, and results in positive civic outcomes. The three strands of the Next Generation Science Standards are easily met through service learning activities. A well-planned service learning activity will employ science and engineering processes, while relying on the application of disciplinary core ideas and seeing cross cutting concepts in action. Because service learning gained popularity in the 1990’s, with various levels of government funding supporting those endeavors, service learning has been the topic of much research. The benefits of such pedagogy are many and include: strengthened college and career readiness skills (e.g., critical thinking, communication, problem solving, teamwork); increased academic achievement; improved social skills; heightened sense of students’ self-worth; demonstration of positive school behaviors (e.g., attendance, classroom skills); promotion of civic engagement and responsibility; among others (see for example, Austin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Billing, 2002, 2011; Furco & Root, 2000; Kiesimeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain, & Neal, 2004; Richardson, et al., 2013; Warren, 2012; Yorio & Ye, 2012).

Because service learning allows for the application of learning in meaningful ways, it adds relevance to instruction, promotes motivation for learning, and may
decrease the drop out rate. Additionally, we see it as a practice that is easy to scaffold, differentiate and made to accommodate all learners. All of these benefits should encourage teachers to continue to embrace this pedagogy and design service learning projects for their students.

Setting up a solid service learning opportunity is essential for its success. Several researchers (Billings, 2011; National Youth Leadership Council, 2008; Youth.gov, n.d.) agree that the following should be included:

- Consider the curriculum and community needs.
- Involve students early.
- Select a focus with your students and community partner.
- Prepare your students for the task.
- Integrate learning and service.
- Conduct ongoing assessment.
- Engage students in reflection.
- Conduct a final evaluation.
- Celebrate completion.

Because we were interested in examining service learning from a participant perspective, we jumped at the opportunity to participate in a service learning project being offered through the University of Portland (UP). This involved going to Alcudia, Mallorca, Spain with a group of faculty, students, and other UP community members. The focus was to engage in an archaeological dig in Pollentia. Pollentia was a Roman town thought to have been established circa 123 BC. The University of Barcelona leads an archaeological dig of the area, which currently consists of a theatre, forum, residential
area, marketplace, and necropolis. The UP group focused their efforts on exploring the necropolis. The dig is funded by the Concorci de la Ciutat Rmana de Pol-lentia, and the purpose is to discover the history of the area; specifically how the Roman culture developed in the region. It is a tourist attraction on the island. The service portion of the project was assisting in excavating the area; the learning was both in discovering the process of archaeology and enriching our understanding of the historical development of the area.

We worked alongside the archaeologists and university students from the University of Barcelona and La Laguna University of the Canary Islands. Each day at the site we were given our “marching orders:” sweeping the site, moving dirt, surveying, light picking, heavy picking, always looking for artifacts. Afternoons were spent at the “Dig House” washing and sorting the artifacts found during the morning dig. The first author spent two weeks with the project while the second author spent four. Both of us reflected on our experiences, singly and together.

We realized that our own experiences of being involved in a service learning project yielded both a wealth of positive outcomes as well as highlighting challenges that could have enriched the experience. We agreed that we gained an understanding of archaeological processes and patterns. We also learned about the history and culture of the area. Additionally, we strengthened our cultural competence by working with a diverse group, culturally, educationally, generationally, and linguistically. Further, we developed new skills: surveying, use of archaeological tools, flying a drone for aerial surveillance. We strengthened our use of the Spanish language. Finally, we experienced the excitement of discovery that pervades archaeology!
What would have enriched the experience for us was more instruction earlier; that is, a better understanding of the archaeology processes prior to the dig. We eventually learned as we went, but a basic explanation of what and why we were assigned our daily tasks would have helped with our overall understanding of the process. For example, we once spent a whole day cleaning (sweeping dirt and loose debris from an area) thinking we were preparing it for a public viewing when meanwhile the next day we were asked to remove about a foot or so more of the ground (which meant lots of picking and lots more debris that then needed to be removed with a re-cleaning of the site). This is analogous to sweeping and mopping a floor, then having many wheelbarrows of dirt dumped on the floor, and being asked to clean it again. We were confused and (admittedly) annoyed. Later we learned they wet the area in the evening to help make the boundaries between layers more visible and that the layer of interest was deeper than it originally appeared. Hence, there was a need to keep digging. An explanation of this prior to our “recleaning” would have been helpful to help us understand the whys for our assigned duties and to appreciate the short and long term goals of the dig. Inadequate preparation and language differences sometimes resulted in frustration, uncertainty, and a sharp learning curve. We did meet regularly in our own UP group and with the larger group. These periodic self/group reflections and communication with the archaeologists (the “instructors”) were essential to bring our lack of knowledge to the forefront and to encourage more just in time instruction!
As a result of our being involved in service learning as students, we learned first-hand some important implications for the classroom. First as teachers we must set the stage. Preparation, basic understanding, and in-time instruction are necessary ingredients for success. Second, student involvement is essential to keep motivation, interest, and learning at high levels. Third, self-reflection it needed for self-assessment and adjustment. Finally, communication among students and between students and teachers is essential for moving the project forward, assessing understanding, and maintaining student investment.

We can personally attest that we did experience many of those benefits identified as service learning outcomes. We did learn a lot in just two to four weeks—and certainly at a much deeper level because of our hands-on involvement. We had a strong sense of camaraderie with all members of the dig; teamwork was a must. We also had a sense of social responsibility—we made sure everyone kept hydrated, rested as needed, and took turns with the more strenuous activities. We had a sense of satisfaction that we were adding to important findings of the scientists and that our work would be viewed by anyone visiting the dig site. Our biggest take away was that this service learning experience was something we would always remember. It is this kind of learning that we want to share with our own students!

References


The second author at the dig site.

A view of Pollentia.
Cleaning the dig site.