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Service Learning and Groundswell

Kate Baran

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Service learning has become an important part of getting students engaged and excited about learning. Groundswell is a Grand Valley State University nonprofit organization funded through the Great Lakes Fishery Trust. Groundswell works with teachers and students across Kent County in Southwest Michigan to provide funding and educational support for successful service learning projects that deal mostly with the Great Lakes, the Grand River and watershed. There are 22 partners of Groundswell throughout Michigan. With those partners, Groundswell serves 17 different schools in Kent County. Service learning has a wide variety of definitions. However, at the basic level service learning is combining course content and community service equally. It strays from traditional teaching in a variety of ways. Service learning requires teachers to lead reflections so students can get the most out of their projects. Groundswell has many partners throughout Kent County. The variety of education and funding Groundswell provides helps teachers and schools construct successful service learning projects. Successful service learning projects can help students achieve in four different ways. The four ways in which students can benefit are academic learning, civic responsibility, personal development and career exploration. The benefits of service learning are endless if researched and executed properly.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Service Learning.....	4
Groundswell.....	7
Benefits of Service Learning	10
Service Learning and Groundswell.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
References	15

Introduction

Service learning education is a type of education that forces students to take an active interest in their learning community. There are many benefits to service learning such as improved academic achievement and different organizations that promote this type of learning. Groundswell of Michigan is one of those organizations that provides funding and educational support to teachers to continue the trend of service learning in our schools. Service learning has many benefits to students that will be explored later, and Groundswell is a great organization that works with teachers and students to get the most out of service learning projects.

Service Learning

Service learning, on the simplest level, is a type of teaching that promotes community service linked with academic study. It provides community engagement where service and academic study are strengthened through a symbiotic relationship. Taking knowledge learned in the classroom and combining that knowledge with community experiences is the focal point of service learning (Felten and Clayton, 2011).

A good service learning project balances learning and service equally. These individual components support each other to enhance the benefits of both learning and service. It is extremely important to service learning that service outcomes are reciprocal with the learning goals (Furco, 1996).

The basis of service learning has multiple components. Students need to participate in an organized service activity. Students need to reflect on the project in order to gain further understanding of the project and the course content to which the project related.

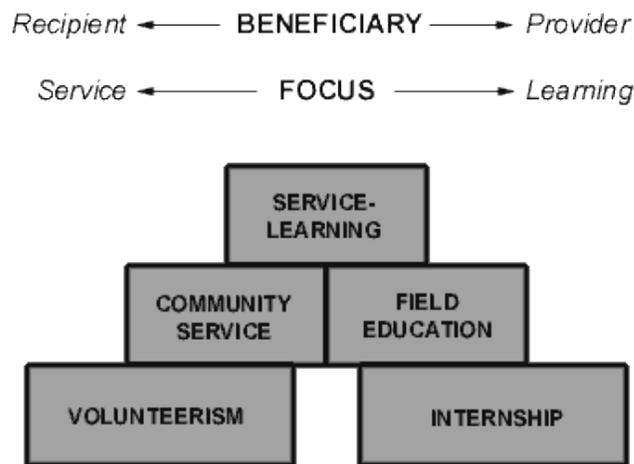
There are short term, semester long or multiyear along as multicourse projects in which students and teachers participate. The service aspect of service learning can be considered direct or indirect and can have a heavy research and responsibility component for both students and teachers (Felten and Clayton, 2011).

The community in which the students serve can also vary. Students can work in their school community or the community surrounding their school. Service learning can be done in another state, country or even online (Felten and Clayton, 2011).

Service learning strays from traditional learning and teaching strategies in a variety of ways. There is an emphasis on what students want to learn and a push for outdoor education within Groundswell. The traditional role of students and teachers where students are lectured by

teachers and then tested on how well they retain the material is challenged by service learning ideas. Service learning “calls on students not only to consume knowledge but also to produce it” (Felten and Clayton, 2011).

How is service learning different from other service programs like community service, volunteerism and internships? Andrew Furco gives an illustration in his article “Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education that helps define the differences between service learning, community service, field education, volunteering and internships.



There are two questions one should ask when deciphering the difference of service learning, community service, field education, volunteerism, and internships. The first question is who is benefitting from the service. The second is whether the focus is on service or learning. These are the two factors in establishing the differences. As I’ve stated before, service learning is right in between. In service learning both provider and recipient benefit equally and learning and service also share equal focus (Furco, 1996).

All the other kinds of service-community service, field education, volunteerism, and internships-are the basis of service learning. They all bring important factors to the unique

experience of service learning. The differences are who the beneficiary is and what the focus is on-service or learning (Furco, 1996).

Groundswell

Groundswell is an environmental education organization that provides educational opportunities for students and teachers in Kent County in Southwest Michigan. Teachers receive training and funds for classroom projects that qualify as environmental and service learning. Housed in the college of education at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), Groundswell is a nonprofit network of local organizations. Groundswell was started in 2009 and is funded through the Great Lakes Fishery Trust (GLFT), the Wege Foundation, the Frey Foundation and the Baldwin Foundation. Groundswell was established as a hub of the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative with the goal to create stewards of the Great Lakes.

The work that Groundswell accomplishes falls under three categories, Engage, Partner and Develop. Groundswell works to engage students from grade 5 to grade 12 in service learning projects in the students' communities by funding and encouraging these projects. Groundswell has many community partners such as Grand Valley State University and Aquinas College, and they empower these partners to work with students and teachers to enhance the opportunities for students, their schools, and their communities. Finally, Groundswell provides professional development days for partnering teachers where teachers can learn more about service learning, environmental education, how to build partnerships and how to build a strong service learning curriculum.

In order for a project to receive funding from Groundswell, projects must meet four requirements. First, the project has to be connected to curriculum standards. Second, the project needs to address a community issue or need. Third, students need to have a voice in the direction the project goes. Finally, the project needs to be connected to one or more community partners to be able to work on the project collaboratively.

Groundswell works with 17 different schools around Kent County. These schools are:

- East Rockford Middle School
- C.A Frost Environmental Academy
- Sparta High School
- Grand Rapids Center for Economicology
- Central High School
- City Middle School
- City High School
- Forrest Hills Central Woodlands
- Forest Hills Eastern Middle School
- Forest Hills Eastern High School
- All Saints Academy
- East Kentwood High School
- New Branches Public School Academy
- Kent City Middle School
- Kent City High School
- Union High School
- The Potters House

Besides the Great Lakes Fishery Trust, the Wege Foundation, the Frey Foundation, the Baldwin Foundation and GVSU, Groundswell is community partners with 22 other programs and businesses in and surrounding Grand Rapids. The list of community partners is as follows:

- Ada Township
- Calvin College
- Kent ISD
- Kent County
- Coca Cola Recycling
- Celebration Cinema
- United Way of West Michigan
- Fishbeck, Thompson, Car and Huber, INC
- Cranbrook Institute of Science

- Annis Water Resource
Institute
- Kent Conservation District
- Wyoming Michigan
- Schupan and Sons Metal
Distribution and Recycling
- Aquinas College
- Howard Christensen Nature
Center
- John Ball Zoo
- Land Conservancy of West
Michigan
- NOAA
- Blandford Nature Center
- WGVU
- WMEAC
- Wild Ones

Benefits of Service Learning

Students who participate in service learning projects and curriculum benefit in a variety of ways. Its transformative learning potential is what makes service learning such a unique and beneficial option. A service learning project is designed with goals in mind that give students experiences in the classroom and in the community and are complimentary with reflection assessments and activities. This ensures that student, teacher, school and community time is used efficiently.

There is a National Commission on Service Learning. This Commission has made the claim that there is copious evidence that students get the most out of learning and learn best when they are interested in learning and when they believe that what they are learning is valuable. With proper training in service learning, teachers can convince students that their projects are valuable and teachers can get their students interested in the topic of their project; therefore leading to increased learning potential (Lewis, 2002).

Research of service learning shows that service learning projects can benefit students in four different ways. In order to achieve all four categories of benefit, a service learning project has to be well researched and well implemented. The four ways in which students can benefit are academic learning, civic responsibility, personal development and career exploration (Lewis, 2002).

How is it known that service learning projects are successful? In order to prove the success of projects there is a pre test and post test. This is how Groundswell is able to maintain funding. At the beginning of the project students are given a pretest and then at the end of the project there is a post test to test how much a student has learned from the service learning project.

These pre and post tests are critical in gauging the success and value of the service learning program Groundswell helps to accomplish. The evaluation assesses the students' perceptions, experience and understanding of the project they in which they are participating or participated. Pre and post testing is crucial in helping to provide financial and administrative support for future Groundswell service learning projects.

A service learning experience includes a number of advantages to students. Students are able to advance their learning goals and try to find the role they play in their community. They are able to be involved in a network of relationships with other students, faculty and staff, community members and community partners. Additionally, they are able to reflect critically on the projects they produce.

When it comes to higher order thinking assessments like critical thinking and analytical essays and case based assignments, service learning students consistently scored higher than their peers not involved in service learning (Felten and Clayton, 2011). Felton and Clayton (2011) say that "service learning has a positive effect on student personal development" (p. 80).

As Felton and Clayton, say service learning boosts many aspects of a student's life. These aspects include improving critical reflection and critical thinking skills, teamwork skills, higher academic performance, a sense of connection to the community, increased social responsibility, higher self efficacy levels and increased empathy levels (Felten and Clayton, 2011). Service learning education increases the students' desire to engage in services upon graduation. Students feel the pull to stay involved in the community after participating in service learning projects (Felten and Clayton, 2011).

Aside from wanting to stay involved in the community, there are also many long term profits to participating in service learning projects. A well designed and executed service

learning project can help students reevaluate their personal perspectives. This can lead to new ideas and new perspectives that can help students make better informed decisions.

Service learning can be for everyone. These projects connect student learning inside and outside the classroom. Projects are designed to be flexible, but also dynamic in order to cause new outlooks, opportunities and educational experiences.

In summary, service learning challenges the traditional view of classroom teaching. Service learning “calls on them [students] not only to consume knowledge but also to produce it” (Felten and Clayton, 2011, p. 82). Students are finding the connection between service and learning. A successful service learning project can transform a student’s outlook of social issues. It can give students a “new set of lenses for seeing the world and new ways of being in it” (Felten and Clayton, 2011, p. 82).

Service Learning and Groundswell

As previously stated, Groundswell is an organization that provides funding and education to teachers in order for them to lead service learning projects with their students. Groundswell currently funds 17 different schools for service learning projects.

Forrest Hills Eastern Middle School has worked to investigate storm water runoff. Students established landscaping practices on school grounds to lessen the invasive species abundance. Their project became a site for local residents near campus to learn about invasive species.

Students at New Branches public school built a greenhouse on school grounds to study how water runoff is affected by fertilizers and pesticides. They then informed the community about their findings.

City Middle school students and the 6th grade students at the Center for Economicology also worked with storm water runoff and its impact on the Grand River. They mapped how soil nutrients were running off and educated local residents about nutrient overload.

East Rockford middle school students studied storm water runoff by using rain barrels. They hosted a rain barrel party and distributed their rain barrels throughout their community. These students also planted a native plant garden on campus and endorsed native plant gardening habits to residents.

Students have a voice in what they want to learn and how they want to execute their service learning project. Teachers lead reflection on projects and tell the students what they are supposed to be learning to help students connect project work to academic content. Teachers are trained to help make the connection from the project back into the classroom.

Conclusion

Service learning is a beneficial nontraditional approach to education. It benefits all kinds of students and projects are flexible so that all types of education levels can be involved. As Felton and Clayton say service learning is “high-impact for all types of students” (Felten and Clayton, 2011, p. 79).

Parents, schools, educators and students should be proud and excited to be able to work with Groundswell and do a service learning project. The benefits are numerous and extend beyond the students. Teachers get support and training, schools benefit and the surrounding community definitely gains from the hard work and dedication to service learning these students and teachers are willing to give.

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