

Considering Service Learning at Hong Kong Academy

by Stephen Dare, Head of School

At Hong Kong Academy, we are in the process of transforming service learning from an adult directed set of activities that makes everyone feel good to developing a mind set that is driven by student understanding through personal and academic connections, and assessed through their ability and willingness to take action. We are aiming to have the practice of service learning be embedded throughout our approach to educating and preparing our students for active engagement in the civic life of their communities wherever they are in the world. We have already begun the process of integrating service learning throughout Primary Years, Middle Years, and Diploma programmes, and how students experience CAS. We know this will take time.

What we have understood through the recent work at our school with Cathryn Berger Kaye's guidance, and through continued conversation and exploration, is how the Five Stages of Service Learning give teachers and students a clear road map for generating evidence. Still, I remain a little concerned that adult driven activities are still quite a likely outcome.

As a child I always considered myself as somebody who was terrible at science. I was taught there are three stages to remember: you write a hypothesis, write what you did (and this was the bulk of what was written), and then write a conclusion (which was what generally what happened). To me it became a mechanical exercise. The teacher provided us with a problem and there was generally a pre-determined outcome that I was supposed to arrive at. I was never asked what I found interesting and what I wanted to find out and therefore never developed an inclination to think like a scientist until I was much older. My point is how do we get teachers to develop student disposition to take action?

If we look through the lens of service and its relevance as a means to apply and internalize academics and personal growth, can we simply articulate why it is important to devote time and energy to this way of thinking (maybe as a set of standards written as understandings)? How do we help educators shift from providing opportunities for activity to becoming facilitators that promote student voice and empower them to take ongoing action? How do we develop student inclination to do something they are passionate about rather than just think about it (and how do we encourage students to think about taking action)? What sorts of conversations should we be engaging the students in to develop passion and emotional attachment and ground that in their ability to seek knowledge?

Among all the topics and issues that I must oversee from my position at Hong Kong Academy, when I consider the idea of service learning it's as if I just read the first chapter of an outstanding book. And I don't want to put it down. Now on to the next chapter.

