

Our Service Learning Journey – a Personal Narrative

by Amy McLean

Our service learning journey began two and a half years ago with two of our AISZ teachers attending a CEESA Service Learning Institute lead by Cathryn Berger Kaye in Prague. The institute was motivating and hearing all the great stories of how service learning is being used in other international schools in the area left us wanting to bring this idea back to Zagreb and make it fly.

That's not so easy. Stephen Covey says, "Motivation is a fire from within. If someone else tries to light that fire under you, chances are it will burn very briefly." As we came back to Zagreb to share our newfound knowledge of a better way, we were received with polite interest but nothing seemed to change. The only way we could really change our school culture was to be the model of change.

In our individual classrooms, my colleague and I who attended the conference chipped away at making changes for ourselves and our students. We took small bites, trying to start small so as to guarantee some sense of success. In my second grade class, we started by working with our perceived problems of what is going on in the playground and ended with a class full of extremely motivated students fully charged to make changes. Although small and relatively insignificant in the grand scheme, the lesson I learned from this experience was the potential and passion the students demonstrated when given ownership and voice in problem solving. By the end of that first year, my students had planted over 200 bulbs in a school beautification endeavor (I think about six of them blossomed) and had collected three carloads of toys for a local social service organization. I was beginning to see service learning as something possible for myself. But still, despite our attempts to model the change, service learning was not taking hold at our school.

At AISZ several key elements are moving the school toward successful school-wide service learning integration:

- Administrative Support noted in statements of service learning being a school-wide initiative and establishing time for professional development and at staff meetings
- Service Learning Coordinator to be a staff champion and facilitator
- Service Learning Teacher Coaches to enable a cadre of teachers the ability to grow personally and professionally
- Staff In-service to establish a common language and understanding of service learning
- Visibility at monthly meetings and by a bulletin board that reminds teacher of where their colleagues are at in the service learning process
- Short and Long Range Planning to set benchmarks for progress
- Community Outreach to include others – local schools and organizations– in their professional development and ongoing dialogue.

The journey to bring service learning to our school continued the following year with appointing a Service Learning Coordinator. In the fall of that year we also sent five teachers from our school to attend a CEESA Service Learning Institute in Vienna, again led by Cathryn Berger Kaye. Again, the teachers who attended were motivated to work with service learning and again, worked to make it happen in their classrooms. The 5th grade teacher came back motivated to create an "In Our Global Village" book and worked cooperatively with the Croatian Culture teacher; this book can be found on this CD-ROM with more information about the program in the Organization Resources section – In Our Global Village. This endeavor was extremely successful and ended up getting publicity when they

invited the mayor of Zagreb to come in and speak to the class, an invitation which he accepted. This publicity was positive in many ways: for other teachers at our school to see what was going on with service learning and this caught the attention of the press and outside community. Another project that was developed during that time was a service learning experience in partnership between my first grade class and a third grade class on an integrated intergenerational unit. The description can be read in the Working With Elders lesson plan included here from the www.GoToServiceLearning.org website.

So here we were, once again, with service learning taking place in some classrooms but not in all. Our director held an expectation to all teachers that they should make at least one attempt to integrate service learning into their curriculum which was definitely a step to move our school in the right direction but still does not create a culture of service. What would it take to motivate, to educate, the whole staff as to what we were trying to do? Would everyone have to go to an institute? Impossible! You can't send a staff of 45 to an institute! But we could bring one presenter to us! During the spring of that year, we brought Cathryn Berger Kaye to Zagreb where she worked with our staff for a two-day institute. Finally, I got the feeling that people understood what it means to work toward being a Service Learning School.

Change has challenges and true change takes time. Service learning is pedagogy and requires teachers to let go of the control that they are so used to having in the classroom. Integrating the process of service learning requires us to be flexible with our curriculum in order to make adjustments and allow for genuine experiences and service to naturally come forth. Before that can even happen, we have to teach children to dig deeper into issues, to do authentic investigation (the first of the Five Stages of Service Learning) and give them the power of knowing that they can have an impact, be it big or small. Having these concepts in place is what it takes to successfully create a spirit and culture of Service Learning and it is all much easier said than done.

This year is year three for service learning at AISZ. Once again, we invited Cathryn Berger Kaye to our school. First Cathryn led two days advancing service learning for our students and teachers. The four-hour session she led with high school students helped teachers in attendance see the high level of engagement as students learned service learning concepts and generated ideas for what they hope to accomplish. Teachers noted the attention levels being sustained and the ideas and learning going on as most significant. Feedback and comments from students were universally positive with students remarking how they didn't know service could be so exciting! One day was also spent with Teacher Coaches (See Teacher Coaches Meeting for overview). We also hosted an afternoon community gathering where parents from our school, community organizations, and educators from nearby public and independent schools could gather to learn about service learning from Cathryn and others within our school.

Our school then hosted Cathryn leading a two-day CEESA sponsored Service Learning Institute with our entire faculty plus other teachers from international schools in other cities and our local community attending. This was a fabulous opportunity for networking and to also to begin making steps to exit the insular bubble of our school community.

Now, each teacher has been asked to submit one service learning endeavor as a formal professional goal. We also have created a service learning committee who are a group of dedicated teachers willing to promote Service Learning as Coaches to help others. Each teacher has also filled out a form indicating their intent for service learning and the forms are posted on a bulletin board in one of three columns: Planning, Education, Action. These forms provide a sense of accountability and also serve to communicate what other teachers are doing to everyone. Each month, at the beginning of a whole staff meeting, we have dedicated 10-15 minutes to highlighting an aspect of service learning and/or to celebrate a success. To me, this time is important to keep reminding us all of what it is we are trying to accomplish and to be inspired by other's successes.

Creating a Service Learning school is not easy. It doesn't happen overnight. Integrating new valuable concepts and teaching methods is a worthwhile process. I continually forgive myself as a teacher and as a Service Learning Coordinator. I want it all to be perfect and it's not. I keep in mind that what is important is not perfection, but **change in the right direction**. And that is where I hope we are moving.

As an addendum, perhaps it would be helpful to see what we were thinking and wondering about as we planned for Cathryn's second visit to the school. This correspondence outlines some of our key questions. Cathryn responded to all of concerns before and during her visit. Communicating most significant topics to a consultant ahead of time let's everyone be better prepared. *Notes from Cathryn are inserted by each set of questions.*

PLANNING FOR THE SERVICE LEARNING VISIT

This document shows what we considered before Cathryn's second visit to our school.

Objectives for Service Learning at AISZ and In-service with Cathy Berger Kaye

1. AISZ staff will acquire a level of understanding sufficient enough so that we have 100% staff participation in a SL endeavor in the 2010-2011 school year.
2. All participants will join in a collaborative group to develop at least one SL plan
3. AISZ will develop an awareness of SL and establish a supportive base within the school and local community.
4. Teachers will develop strategies for working with hard to motivate students
5. IB teachers will have strategies for implementing SL in their structured curriculum.

These objectives are quite specific to your coming to Zagreb to work with our staff. The positive piece is that, I believe, you will have a mostly captivated audience who has already bought into the idea of SL but many who still have yet to get their feet wet. Also attending will be staff members who are new to SL. We will also be inviting attendees from other CEESA schools. **Given the diversity of experience of the AISZ staff regarding SL, what are your thoughts about how we advertise the in-service? Who is our target group?**

From CBK: In promoting a service learning in-service, the key is communicating that there will be practical ideas that can be immediately transferred to the classroom. Teachers want ideas they can use. Of course we need to blend in theories and pedagogy, however at the end of the session, the takeaway needs to be: I can use this! or I can do this! Service learning has many takeaways when modeled and presented as engaging teaching practice.

Regarding *Who is the target group?* – the entire faculty! The essence here is to create a common working vocabulary and understanding of:

- What is service learning, really?
- How does service learning further the mission of the school?
- How will my using this methodology improve my reaching and teaching every student?

Given that we want to imbed a culture of SL at AISZ, **what are things we can do to promote, implement, and sustain SL at AISZ?** Things we have discussed are to have each teacher dedicate one of their annual professional development goals towards SL. Another is to focus attention on SL when hiring new staff. Another idea is to have a core group of teachers develop short, mid and long range goals for SL at AISZ. When you come, we would like you to work separately with that core group to develop those goals. **Do you have suggestions for selecting members for this group? In working with a small group, how much time would you need to achieve our objective? Have you worked with small groups like this before to develop a plan of action for a school?**

From CBK: You have already done an excellent job of answering the first question! One of the additional ideas is to continue to make service learning present through time during staff meetings discussion about how things are progressing, sharing successes and challenges – and seeking peer guidance and assistance as necessary. Providing mini-workshops on key aspects of service learning is always helpful – and many ideas for this can be found in *The Complete Guide to Service Learning* in Chapter 17, Creating a Culture of Service especially beginning on page 245, with the section Growing Service Learning at Your School. Keep in mind that service learning is a “team sport” – the more you can develop collegiality the better.

A Core Group of teachers can be critical especially when they become Teacher Coaches for Service Learning. Within their own time together they can be a Professional learning Community to continue developing their ideas and practice. As they then become helpful to others they experience the merits of being a “coach” – and as a note, this is what we spent a fair amount of time on when we worked together, the idea of becoming a teacher coach. Teachers can self-identify and also they can be approached; often you know who may have the leaning to be in this role. For my visit, one full day with the coaches will be a great way to launch this concept.

See the document Professional Development: a Day for Coaches for more information on how this day evolved.

Related to the idea of creating a culture of SL at AISZ, I am wondering **what you have seen that works at other schools of a similar size?** One of the concerns from teachers was the issue of time. **Do you endorse carving a common time out during the week (or month) dedicated to cross curricular SL collaboration? What is the role of a SL coordinator in other schools that you have visited?**

From CBK: Again, I will reference *The Complete Guide to Service Learning*, Chapter 17, Creating a Culture of Service. This covers many aspects of building and sustaining service as an inherent aspect of a school culture,, whatever their size. Of paramount importance is ongoing communication. Consider how many new ideas are presented to any school faculty And how many “stick”? Keeping service learning on the agenda at meetings, having articles in school newsletters, having a showcase at the front of the school – even a “service learning museum” – to promote this as an important aspect. All of this matters. I even know of a school that created a motto and placed this on the front of their building to show how service learning is a part of the fiber of their school and community – and they live up to this across the entire program. (See the picture of the front of this school just below this box – located in Sedalia, Missouri.)

And rather than carving out weekly time for service learning, when we approach implementing service learning as a teaching pedagogy, this is not a separate process – this is all integrated. We don’t separate out cooperative learning, so in the same fashion, service learning is a vehicle for the teaching process.

The role of the service learning coordinator will vary depending on the time allotted, whether this is a singular or shared position, and how developed the program is at the time of this role. Always key to this role is:

- Providing professional development opportunities, from inside the school and from outside, as needed. This includes professional development opportunities *for the Coordinator* so she or he can improve and advance within this role.
- Keeping track of what is being done and being certain other teachers know; this allows for students working on similar topics across grade levels to collaborate.
- Communicating and encouraging others to do the same in a myriad of formats, including having a service learning link on the school website and in promotional materials about the school for perspective families.
- Be certain that within the transient aspect of international schools there is a system for keeping new hires – administration, teachers, and support staff – all aware of the value and implementation of service learning. For teachers, an in-service also is important to assist in being able to implement service learning. A teacher coach or mentor will be extremely helpful during this transition.
- Provide coaching of the service learning process.
- Be on the lookout for service learning teacher leaders who can be examples for others and build leadership from within. One school district I work with in the United States has really done an outstanding job of this in particular, and now have a growing cadre of teachers who have expertise in different elements of service learning, for example Service Learning Math Integration or Reflection Strategies. They present now within their district and to teacher throughout their region.



This is a photo of the front of Heber Elementary placed there after two years of integrating service learning throughout their curriculum.

Lastly, we have questions about having you work with students. Unfortunately, MS will be away the days we are planning your visit. **The only way around this would be for you to split your time with us and, rather than spending 2 days prior to the in-service at school, have you spend one and then return for a day after your trip to the coast to work with MS. Would that be something you would consider?** (We were unable to make this arrangement.) We will definitely have you working with HS students and their teachers to promote leadership and responsibility through SL. **Ideally, how much time would you want to work with them. Would 4 hours be sufficient?**

From CBK: So much is going on at international schools that it's common for some teachers to be away or students to miss some opportunities. The majority of the teachers were present and a significant number of students were able to participate. In this way, the concepts are ideally embedded and the service learning coordinator and coaches can do the rest to follow up.