



*A pitcher  
cries for  
water  
to carry*

*and a  
person for  
work that is  
real.*

—MARGE PIERCY

# Work That Is *Real*

Service learning that is firmly embedded in the curriculum connects learning to life.

Service learning as an integral facet of academic pedagogy is catching on everywhere—and for good reasons. Even in challenging economic times, when high-stakes testing appears to be calling the shots, educators realize that having students show up is only part of the equation. Like adults, students want a significant reason to turn off the alarm clock in the morning, get out of bed, go to work or school, and learn. They crave purpose to their lives like everyone else. And they want relevance—they want to know that what they are studying, practicing, researching, and remembering can be put to use.

Recently, I asked a group of high school students in Humble, TX, “How many of you ever wonder, ‘Why am I learning this?’” Hands flew up. When I asked the same question in Indianapolis, a girl who had been alert and attentive to the conversation rested her arms on the table, put her head down, and moaned, “All the time.” I confess that when I ask teachers, “How many of you look out the window and wonder, ‘Why am I teaching this?’” the answer is the same. Clearly, educators would prefer a different response. Service learning can make a difference, as evidenced by the following examples.

- At High Tech High Media Arts in San Diego, CA, humanities and science teachers collaborated so that their students could conduct sophisticated water testing and develop media campaigns to encourage greater public participation in water protection and conservation. Teachers noted the extensive work that was accomplished and the students attested that they worked their hardest on the project.
- AP American History students in Albion, NY, dressed in period costumes and led 700 local residents on ghost tours in the cemetery to connect the past with the present and build community knowledge and pride.
- At Santa Barbara (CA) High School, students prepare about 600 tax returns for low-income individuals and families free of charge each year; students are certified by the IRS and gain valuable experience while they provide a much-needed service.
- Students at Mora (MN) High School maximize their “school to career” studies through community participation. One class developed a business plan with community partners and renovated and operated a local theater’s concession area that had sat idle for 20 years.
- Students who attend Preble High in Green Bay, WI, wrote a book about their community—which included photographs and interviews about local government, history, traditions, and life as a teenager—to share their lives and experiences with a worldwide audience through In Our Global Village, an international program. (See Townsend, p. 42, for more information about In Our Global Village.)
- Students with developmental disabilities who worked at an animal shelter in Massachusetts created photo and video displays to increase animal adoption. The project taught them skills and vocabulary that helped them in all their classes.
- Students at Lyman Moore Middle School in Portland, ME, planned and hosted swearing-in ceremonies for new citizens. In partnership with the Immigration and Naturalization Services office, students learned about the many countries people



AP American History students in Albion, NY, led ghost tours to make local history come alive for the community.

come from; provided resources for the children; and gained a deep admiration for the people whose stories they heard, building respect for others that will last a lifetime.

### The Foundations of Service Learning

Each of those examples reflect several standards that are consistent with K–12 Service Learning Standards for Quality Practice (National Youth Leadership Council, 2008).

High-quality service learning:

- Extends over enough time for the teacher to meet curricular objectives
- Makes content and skill development—learning—the centerpiece
- Provides meaningful service, with progress that is monitored and documented by students and validated by their partners
- Exposes students to varied careers
- Incorporates diversity through interactions with people of all ages, levels of experience, backgrounds, cultures, and opinions
- Fosters reciprocal partnerships that build strong relationships and improve community perception of the school.

### A Teaching Methodology

Perhaps you have seen schools where service is accomplished through student councils, clubs, honor society, and an annual canned food drive. Typically done as community service, those opportunities have value and may expose select students to ways to participate in society, but they do not take advantage of the full depth and power of service learning as a teaching methodology for all students. The five stages of service learning promote a well-constructed experience for all students.

**Investigation.** This two-part process begins by identifying personal interests, skills, and talents that will be applied during service learning and moves on to identifying and authenticating a community need to address.

**Preparation and planning.** During this step, the classroom curriculum comes to life as students learn the content and skills that get them ready them for the next stage.

**Action.** Direct (face-to-face and hands-on) service and advocacy have the most impact on the students, followed by indirect action and research.

**Reflection.** With reflection—an essential ongoing process that increases personalization, connections, and insights—cognitive and affective aspects of the experience are reinforced.

**Demonstration.** When students formalize what and how they learned and add what they have contributed and communicate it to a public audience (e.g., parents, other students, the community at large, or public officials), they confirm all aspects of the learning.

Toni Plummer (personal communication, November 10, 2009), a health educator at Albion (NY) Central Schools, summed it up well when she said, “Service learning is an excellent way for students to become aware of their own community and to become productive and concerned citizens. We no longer look at what we do as projects; my students offer ideas as an objective of the class, and we work together to accomplish what is needed.”

### Service Learning and Literacy

Among the advantages that service learning provides in the classroom is its ability to enable students to go beyond literacy in any subject—the concrete knowledge and skills—to concentrate on the function—the ability to apply knowledge with purpose and intent toward successful participation in society. When function is neglected, students can become apathetic and reluctant to work hard enough to acquire and retain the requisite transferable skills that make a successful learner. Service learning contributes to:

- Civic literacy—the ability to participate in and contribute to the dynamics of a class, a neighborhood, or a community, which may lead to interaction with government, organizations, and businesses to improve quality of life
- Social literacy—the ability to differentiate appropriate behaviors for a variety of settings and populations
- Cultural literacy—the ability to be tolerant and understand the similar and different behaviors and attitudes that can be drawn from a variety of backgrounds and lifestyles
- Language literacy—the use of texts that build connections across the curriculum and that encourage students to see themselves on the pages and use the stories to make sense of their lives
- Any other literacy that matches students’ interests and promotes their personal growth and constructive participation—such as music literacy, sports literacy, financial literacy, media literacy, environmental literacy, and so on.

### The Big World of Service Learning

Service learning resources abound to help schools begin this effective approach to teaching and learning or to advance what is already going on. Leadership sets the stage for teachers to be willing to explore new ideas and ways

to elevate how students develop measurable competencies while becoming more well-rounded and civically astute adolescents. How can principals move their schools forward?

**Professional development.** To adopt or build upon any new construct, teachers need time to learn the basics of the method and to recognize the curricular advantages. This can be accomplished through on-site staff development using outside experts or through teachers who have knowledge and expertise leading their peers. Conferences afford learning opportunities. Reading and discussing articles and books on service learning introduces the concepts and often uncovers which teachers are willing to begin implementing these methods.

## Action Research

For many students, the assignment of a research project or paper prompts the question, How long does this have to be? Once that’s determined, students go to Google. Yes, sadly, this mathematical equation holds all too true: research = Google. Of course, Internet searches have value and their place; with service learning, however, students learn four ways to do research and gather information about a community need. This model holds true in elementary, middle and high school and in college, and it transforms research to a higher level of inquiry.

When investigating a community need or conducting any form of research, teach students how each of these four sources contribute to good research:

- **Media:** includes books, newspapers, film, journals, television, and the Internet
- **Interview:** typically involves a person with expertise or experience in a given area
- **Observation and experience:** draws upon what students know already and what they glean through a concrete event
- **Survey:** gathers information from a general population.

**Source:** Kaye, C. B. (2010). *The complete guide to service learning: Proven, practical ways to engage students in civic responsibility, academic curriculum, & social action.* (2nd ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

## Becoming Heroes

Students in Maureen Connolly's English class at Mineola (NY) High School read *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson as part of a ninth-grade theme, What Is a Hero? After reading, they inventoried their personal skills and talents, and on the basis of their interests, they formed small groups of six within two larger sections. All of the groups in section A were to teach third graders about global issues using *Listen to the Wind*, the children's version of Mortenson's book. They constructed lesson plans that included reading the book aloud, discussion questions to check for comprehension, and age-appropriate motivational activities.

The students in section B developed lessons to explain the concept of Pennies for Peace, the initiative designed by Mortenson to help build schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Those students planned to lead elementary students in designing containers to collect pennies. The third-grade teacher visited the high school to review all the plans and taught the older students how to reach and teach younger children. This interaction with an expert prompted the ninth-grade students to eagerly revise their work, because, as Connolly said, "My students wanted to get it right; they were invested in having the time with the students be meaningful."

When the 45 third graders finally arrived at Mineola to meet with their mentors, the high school class had planned the day thoughtfully and it resulted in successful interactions and delighted students and teachers.

For Connolly's students, the lessons learned were palpable. In addition to seeing the text they had read come to life, they learned extensively about time management and editing. As Connolly explains (personal communication, November 10, 2009), "We so often want students to learn about revision. In this case, students met with a teacher and had a purpose to revise their lessons. This was a really big deal and contradicted the typical ninth-grade mentality of 'I finished, I did it once.' Working with the younger children mattered, so their preparation mattered more.

"Service learning is purposeful learning. Students learn this is more than getting a grade, their actions go to change something—to make an improvement somewhere in their lives they can see. In English classes, we read about what makes a good book or good drama, and we read stories that have a great deal of tragedy. Service learning is a way to say, 'I am not just showing you all these terrible things,' we are also saying, 'What are we going to do about it?' With service learning we are taking them beyond exposure to concepts and lessons, we help them know they can contribute."

And contribute they did. The elementary students enthusiastically collected and contributed \$514 in pennies! In January, the partnership will be renewed when the high school students teach their third-grade buddies how to analyze text and literary devices using a picture book with a social justice theme. Together they will select a local organization and create an activity that will be helpful to people in need right in their own backyard.



High school students in Mineola, NY, planned and taught the Pennies for Peace curriculum for a third-grade class that raised \$514 in pennies.



**Professional learning communities (PLCs).** Typically, a PLC team can lead mini-workshops during faculty or department meetings and share successes that eventually inspire others. Again, reading books and articles; seeing films; and attending local, state, or national conferences sustains teachers' interest while building the concrete knowledge for leadership.

**Web sites and books.** The Web sites listed in this article offer reliable information. Many are portals that can help principals find out more about what is happening in their states, uncover funding resources, and find examples that will motivate their faculty members.

**Connections with service learning colleagues.** Every state has a lead agency that receives federal funding for service learning. The agency can help principals find administrators who can be partners in getting started or elevating service learning to the next level.

### The Bottom Line

Why does service learning matter for schools? Applying prior and acquired knowledge and skills through service learning creates an explicit and deliberate arena for students to experience the relationship between what is "strictly academic" and what is often perceived as "real life." The relevance of school and the connection between subjects becomes apparent. "I have to" becomes "I want

## Additional Information and Resources

**www.abcdbooks.org** ABCD Books and CBK Associates offer information, resources, on-site consulting, and articles about service learning that can be downloaded.

**www.learnandserve.org** Learn and Serve America (a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service) provides funding for states to advance service learning in K–12 schools; visit their Web site to find the lead agency in your state—many offer professional development opportunities and online resources.

**www.servicelearning.org** The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse harbors a wealth of resources, including service learning examples, a library of research, and a way to submit questions.

**www.nylc.org** The National Youth Leadership Council hosts an annual National Service-Learning Conference and the Generator Schools Network.

**www.YSA.org** Youth Service America will introduce you to Global Youth Service Day, grant opportunities, and stories about exemplary service learning from teachers at [www.GoToServiceLearning.org](http://www.GoToServiceLearning.org), an easy-to-use database featuring teacher examples of best practice service-learning experiences meeting academic standards.

**www.inourvillage.org** Learn more about the In Our Global Village project.

to," and "Why am I learning this?" is replaced with "I get it!" Most schools' mission statements include the goal of students becoming the kind of active citizens and change agents that their communities, the country, and the world need. Service learning may well be the vehicle to bring that ultimate mission to life. **PL**

**Cathryn Berger Kaye** ([cbkaye@aol.com](mailto:cbkaye@aol.com)), a former teacher, is the president of CBK Associates and ABCD Books.

Portions of this article are adapted from *The Complete Guide to Service Learning: Proven, Practical Ways to Engage Students in Civic Responsibility, Academic Curriculum, & Social Action (2nd ed.)* by Cathryn Berger Kaye (Free Spirit Publishing, 2010).

## Read and Serve

Young adult books can help transform students into avid readers and also propel them toward civic action. As you read the descriptions of several of my favorites, consider how each could connect literacy across the curriculum and prove a catalyst for service learning.

***After Ghandi: One Hundred Years of Nonviolent Resistance*** by Anne Ibley O'Brien and Perry Edmond O'Brien (Charlesbridge, 2009). Key moments of activism have occurred through the tireless work of courageous individuals; some are well-known and others, such as Charles Perkins's commitment to the Aboriginal Rights Movement, will provide new insights. Nonfiction, 181 pp.

***The Carbon Diaries 2015*** by Saci Lloyd (Holiday House, 2008). It's 2015 in London, and 15-year-old Laura is keeping a diary. She is distressed because after a great storm "the gov volunteered Britain to be the stupid guinea pig freak and ration carbon." Students must consider how limiting daily carbon usage would dramatically change their lives. Gripping, relevant, and edgy. Fiction, 330 pp.

***Chanda's Wars*** by Allan Stratton (HarperCollins, 2008). Chanda has lost her parents to the AIDS epidemics ravaging the African continent and her two siblings have been abducted to serve in the children's army. This contemporary issue looms large today in this story of war that tears families apart and places young people in adult roles. Fiction, 400 pp.

***Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*** by Philip Hoose (Farrar Straus Giroux, 2009). At 15, Claudette Colvin refused to relinquish her seat on the bus to a White passenger. Later that year, Rosa Parks became the face of the protest that followed, but Claudette participated as a plaintiff in the court case that eventually integrated Montgomery's buses. Nonfiction, 144 pp.

***Bifocal*** by Deborah Ellis and Eric Walters (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2007). Jay, a junior football player, observes a lunchtime school raid that results in a

student's arrest as a terrorist. He sees a second student, Haroon, handcuffed and dragged to the police car because he is a "brown" student who is in the room with the suspect. In alternating chapters, Jay and Haroon question their identities and loyalties to athletics, race, religion, school, and family. Both develop a sense of agency about everyday actions. Fiction, 273 pp.

***The Photographer*** by Emmanuel Guibert, Didier Lefèvre, and Frédéric Lemerrier (First Second, 2009). This graphic novel follows photographer Didier Lefèvre as he records his work with Doctors Without Borders in Afghanistan starting in 1986. The book interlaces photographs; illustrations; and a narrative of his encounter with the host culture and its important history, which remains relevant to the geopolitical landscape today. Nonfiction, 267 pp.

***The Rock and the River*** by Kekla Magoon (Aladdin, 2009). The year is 1968. Fourteen-year old Sam can hardly stand the tension between his nonviolence-preaching father and his older brother who has joined the Black Panthers, a new group in Chicago. A powerful portrait of a divided community coming together for justice. Fiction, 289 pp.

***Lunch With Lenin*** by Deborah Ellis (Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2008). This book contains 10 short stories that are based on the real lives of real young people all over the world who are affected by the drug trade and substance abuse, each with an engaging twist. By drawing together stories from diverse settings, students can recognize the global issues that urgently require response. Fiction, 192 pp.

***Sunrise Over Fallujah*** by Walter Dean Myers (Scholastic, 2008). "Birdy" Perry is far from Harlem as a young soldier taking part in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His Civilian Affairs squadron is supposed to secure Fallujah through interactions with the Iraqi people. The problems are discerning good guys from bad and coming to terms with war and loss. Fiction, 290 pp.