

Professional Development at the Prague CEESA Service Learning Institute

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It was the most rewarding and satisfying experience to attend this conference. The presentations were made very eloquently by Cathryn Berger Kaye, who really knew the subject.

Service learning is all about a paradigm shift in how we can rethink the way students learn and how we teach. I went to the conference thinking that service learning was another way to call Community Service, only to find out that I was completely wrong. Community service focuses on helping less fortunate through fundraisers. Money raised through community service is usually a consequence of students having to fulfill some curricular or non-curricular obligations. In some cases it could also be a consequence of some punishment being meted out or to receive a reward through participation.

Service learning on the other hand does not believe in rewarding the students through pizza or CAS points. The emphasis in service learning is to encourage students to be thinking of the "cause and effect" of the issues being addressed. The objective is to provide students with an opportunity to be involved in a "real" experience that benefits the community. The process of understanding the cause and effect results in a true learning for the students. Service learning requires a direct link between the curriculum and the identification of a real need that becomes the focus of the service so it's very tightly integrated. Students learn how to analyze the problem or need, investigate the causes and work through possible solutions to fix the problem or address the need in some authentic way. This generates true "buy in" and increases personal involvement. This is the heart and soul of service learning and is what should be the motivating factor for students. Service learning, if done right, results in creating a community of caring, thoughtful and responsible problem-solving global citizens.

We were provided with many working examples of projects that we could learn from. One example:

A first grade class was studying the life cycle of animals. As part of this study they visited a rice field to study how rice grows. They found out that the rice harvest began right after the ducks laid their eggs in the fields. The harvesting process caused the newly laid eggs to be destroyed and the effect was the population of ducks started to dwindle. When the children learned about this they decided to do something about this problem and moved to take action. They returned to their classroom and studied about these ducks and their life cycle. Their research and investigations gave them some understanding and solutions on how to try and fix the problem.

They returned to speak to the rice farmer explained to him what they would like to do. The solution was to collect the eggs before the harvest began and to bring them to school. The young students found out that the high school biology class was also studying about animal life cycles so they asked them to help and they agreed. The high school students set up incubators to allow the eggs to hatch. This collaborative effort provided yet another learning opportunity for all the students involved. The first grade students also kept a journal of the whole experience and were able to see relevance of their efforts and how they could make a difference even though they were only 6 years old.

Service learning empowers young learners to be independent and collaborative problem-solvers and their experiences through these projects will remain with them for life. The most important part of service

learning is the involvement and the process rather than the end result.

Another example provided at the conference was about a third grade class who were working on a unit in Wellness. They were studying the impact of yoga and its benefits on health. The first step had the students researching and studying about yoga and the reasons for practicing yoga. The students then produced a brochure on how to practice yoga, which they took with them to a nursing home and taught the older patients how to do yoga. This was such a wonderful way for students to appreciate the value of yoga and to share their learning while having compassion to help older people!

All educational research shows that in order to be successful in life students need to know how to:

- Access information
- Organize themselves
- Ask questions
- Retrieve information
- Communicate appropriately (listening, speaking, writing, drawing)
- Be resourceful
- Collaborate with others
- Foster good literacy skills

Service learning is all about helping students develop the above skills and helping them become responsible global citizens with a desire to be lifelong learners equipped with the life skills necessary to survive successfully in tomorrow's world.

What better way to teach our children? These experiences encourage our students to take charge and act with the realization that they can make a difference in this world. A little involvement in service learning goes a long way and this would truly be a worthy learning experience not only for the students but also for our teachers and others involved. It would benefit our school and its program of studies by working closely alongside with the community raising awareness of issues that need our attention and providing us an opportunity to be actively engaged and learning at the same time.

Janice Myles continued to attend several CEESA Service Learning Institutes after this inaugural one held in Prague. She became extremely active in leadership of service learning in her school, has led professional development for her peers, and considers this an essential part of her teaching approach. Read other submissions on this DVD by Janice in **Case Studies: American International School of Bucharest**.