

2009

Service-learning: Promoting leadership in young people

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This article was originally published as:

Lavery, S. D. (2009). Service-learning: Promoting leadership in young people. *Principal Matters*, 80, 28-30.

This article is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article/26. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



Service-Learning: promoting leadership in young people

Service-learning is a teaching pedagogy used in primary and secondary schools, and in universities, to enhance traditional modes of learning. For example, in Western Australia, many Catholic and Independent secondary schools operate comprehensive service-learning programs, while Government schools require 20 hours of service commitment from their senior students. Yet, not only is service-learning educationally sound (Schoenfeld, 2006), it is an excellent way of promoting leadership in students (Lavery, 2007; Kaye, 2004). This article initially looks at two methods of how service-learning can develop responsible leadership in young people. First, service-learning can develop specific leadership skills, and second, service-learning can engender a notion of service leadership. This article then explores the practical experiences and reflections of pre-service education students involved in a first semester service-learning course at the Fremantle campus of The University of Notre Dame Australia (NDA) during 2008. The article subsequently considers the evaluations of the students' service-learning placement supervisors.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is a teaching method where classroom learning is deepened and extended through service to others. Specifically, service-learning is undertaken by students in the context of meaningful school-community partnerships, to provide experiential learning opportunities within a curriculum, which are a benefit to the community (Gilding & Wallace, 2003). Equally important is that students then extend their learning in other activities. One such "other" activity is the development of leadership skills.

There are two broad ways in which service-learning can enhance student leadership. Firstly, participation in service-learning programs develops specific skills of leadership where students take initiative, solve problems, work as a team, and demonstrate their abilities through helping others (Kaye, 2004). Secondly, service-learning experiences can provide a vehicle for students' active citizenship, participation in the community and civic responsibility (Gilding & Wallace, 2003). In particular, students can learn how to sensitively meet the needs of those whom they serve. This point is especially significant as effective leaders are those who think

“needs”. That is, leaders have the greatest positive impact when they respond to people’s basic human requirements (Sofield & Kuhn, 1995). Greenleaf (1977, p. 13) highlighted this point when he stressed that at the heart of leadership ought be the wish “to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served”. Research has suggested that secondary students involved in service-learning can develop leadership skills and then take on school leadership responsibilities in a spirit of service (Lavery, 2007). An example to illustrate this dynamic is the service-learning program which has been developed at The University of Notre Dame Australia.

Notre Dame Australia

Students undertaking the secondary teaching program in the School of Education (NDA) study a designated service-learning unit. They learn the theory behind social justice, and, at the same time, engage with the local community in actual, practical service activities. Students are required to complete between twelve and twenty hours of service. While they are provided with guidelines as to what is an appropriate placement, students are responsible for deciding where they will undertake their service-learning. The program is in its fifth year and, increasingly, students have taken on more challenging placements. In first semester 2008, 52 secondary education students completed their service experience in a wide range of community facilities that included:

- The '*Fresh Start*' drug rehabilitation clinic;
- St John of God Hospice;
- The '*Shopfront*', an initiative funded through the Catholic fundraising organisation called '*Lifelink*';
- The Society of St Vincent de Paul;
- The Drug Awareness, Rehabilitation and Management WA Youth Outreach Program;
- Association for the Blind;
- Aspire Fitness Chemotherapy Club;
- Conservation Volunteers Australia;
- Kanyana Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre;

- Moorditj Noongar Community College;
- Primary and secondary special education support units; and
- An Intensive English Centre for newly arrived migrant children.

Students' Comments: meeting needs

An essential component of service-learning is that those providing the service meet actual needs of people in the community. Students working at the '*Fresh Start*' drug rehabilitation clinic, for example, assisted patients in recovery following their Naltrexone implants, as the drugs used in the operation can dramatically affect the body. At St John of God Hospice a student helped a man seriously ill with cancer and spent time with his 4 year-old daughter. Service at the *Shopfront* meant sharing time with people without family, a job, or a place to stay. A typical night with the Drug Awareness, Rehabilitation and Management Youth Outreach Program consisted of driving around Northbridge, finding homeless young people, serving them coffee, tea, milo and biscuits, and lending a sympathetic ear. Working in primary and secondary education support units involved assisting children with special needs. Helping out at the Intensive English Centre entailed providing language support to children of refugees, mainly through listening to the children read, carrying on conversations in English, and aiding in written expression.

In a service-learning program student learning can vary significantly. Three student reflections, indicative of the tone of so many others, are listed below. These examples are taken from student journals, with permission, and highlight the type of learning that students experience. One student who worked at the St John of God hospice commented that she had “undergone an incredibly empowering and enlightening journey”. She felt that the bond she had developed with staff and patients was “very special”, and that it would be a disservice not to continue the journey and allow for the relationships to grow. This student further remarked: “I have realized that to give of the heart can be difficult, however, to selflessly help others is truly the most gratifying, rewarding and enjoyable way to live. Through helping others we are not simply existing – we are truly living”. Another student, who worked with the Drug Awareness, Rehabilitation and Management WA Youth Outreach Program, wrote: “it

had been a hard night ... throughout the whole evening I had been exposed to more and more sad stories of seemingly unending despair from these kids". This student noted, however, that a sense of trust was beginning to form between her and "some of the kids". She wrote of her "determination to give what I can to these kids, and hopefully make some difference, no matter how small". A third student, who helped children with special needs, noted: "my service at the school reinforced the importance of taking time to show love and care to others". She remarked that the children "are often overwhelmed by their difference and need to feel that they have value and are special". She commented that oftentimes in society these children, and their parents, are made to feel "a burden, or a problem to be handled". She noted that the teachers whom she met "are marvelous examples of living a life of true service" who "liberate these children from the shackles of their difference; helping them ... to reach their potential". All three examples stress the positive force of addressing the needs of people through actions of service.

Supervisors' Comments: leadership attitudes

Placement supervisors are asked to grade students in a range of categories and are invited to make comments where applicable. Their comments for the 2008 cohort were especially positive. Students were graded very highly (excellent) in the areas of behaviour, the standard of work, level of engagement with clients and staff, as well as their ability to comprehend instructions, accept criticism, show initiative, and deal with difficult situations. These characteristics, the author would argue, are all highly desirable in a leader.

What was perhaps more instructive, were the many favourable comments recorded by supervisors, especially given that the students were not volunteers of whom one might expect such qualities, but were all required to take a compulsory unit. Comments included: "very professional"; "has a great attitude towards the children"; "showed empathy and worked extremely well with our clientele"; "shows excellent skills in all areas of this clinic"; "keen to understand the individual needs of each client she supported"; "her approach towards the students has been outstanding," "has carried out her duties with diligence and enthusiasm", "we welcome ... back into the team anytime she feels so inclined!" Such remarks indicate a high level of engagement, a preparedness to cooperate, and a willingness to contribute.

Many of the supervisors' comments also highlighted specific leadership behaviours of the students. For example: "has shown excellent initiative in dealing with both patients and staff", "has implemented a pilot project with students at risk ... has developed a strong rapport with a number of students, and this has had a strong positive influence on the students' self confidence", "professional, responsible, enthusiastic approach to working with community groups", "has demonstrated great commitment in solving problems with our clients", "has developed a rapport with some behaviorally challenged students, and, in turn, taught them to value education". It is noteworthy that many of these education students will be teaching next year, perhaps preparing their own students to be service leaders.

Conclusion

Preparing students for leadership is an important educational task. In particular, principals and teachers in schools, administrators and lecturers at universities, have a responsibility to carefully groom tomorrow's leaders. Will the leaders they prepare be people who "shoulder their way into leadership positions, driven by upward mobility and a thirst for personal success" (Beare, 1998)? Or will our teaching institutions develop in young people an alternative that is "selfless, large-souled, (and) expansively visioned" (Beare, 1998)? Society needs leaders who are responsible in business, aware of the needs of the environment, civically minded in politics, and sympathetic to those living on the margins. Service-learning is one avenue by which schools and universities can actively challenge students to meet people's needs, enable students to reflect on and learn from their actions, and then encourage them to translate their learning to other situations. Service-learning programs have the potential to widen young people's horizons and imbue in them a noble desire to serve first, and then lead.

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