

Learning Through Serving in A Global Economy: A Reciprocal Sharing of Our Lives

Anna Verhoye

Communicologist, Communications Faculty
Dakota County Technical College, Rosemount, MN

Susan Allen

Communicologist, Communications Faculty
Hennepin Technical College, Brooklyn Park/Eden Prairie, MN

Introduction

Dakota County Technical College began its international Learning Through Serving program in 2002. Anna Verhoye was on a quest to teach students about social justice issues and world poverty. Although a service learning component had been an element of Verhoye's curriculum for over 14 years she wanted to expand her students' learning to include a shared cultural experience. In applying for grants to build a program partnering with a mission in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala, Verhoye was repeatedly turned down. The rejection for grant money to build the program was met with, "We have plenty of poverty in this country if people want to learn about social justice issues." Verhoye persisted however, demanding that the type of poverty in third world countries and the political, social, and economic constraints evidenced in places like Guatemala provided a fertile ground for teaching and learning about poverty – opportunities for learning that are prohibitive in this country. In order for people to *really* learn about poverty and social justice, they have to witness it and participate in it through the lives of those who live it, Verhoye claims. She said, "There is no way someone socialized in the U.S. culture can ever really '*get it*', but that's not the Learning Through Serving program's objective. *The fundamental premise of the program is to promote a reciprocal sharing of lives to enhance the understanding of world poverty, injustice, and shared responsibility for global issues through social justice education.*"

Development of Program

After the first successful year of taking a class to Guatemala to learn and serve and with the support of Dakota County Technical College's administration, a formal program was established and over \$30,000 in grant money was secured to grow the program. In its second year, two other schools in Minnesota joined the program as a part of the learning, serving, and observing team. Each journey consists of students, faculty, and a learning, serving, and observing (LSO) team. The LSO team is comprised of faculty, administrators, staff, or community members who want to learn about the program and share in our experience. As part of our learning, it is critical we invite our local and national communities to become fully engaged in our program. In the second year, faculty members from the two schools who were on the LSO team became full consortium members and program leaders. Sue Allen, communication faculty member at Hennepin Technical College (MN), and Kathi Rusch, Service-Learning Coordinator at South Central College (MN), became instrumental in helping to grow the program over the next four years. Currently, there are more than eight colleges and universities in Minnesota, Missouri, and Pennsylvania who have joined our Learning Through Serving consortium. The consortium that was established to manage the program reflects an interdisciplinary and multi-campus membership.

In addition to creating a Guatemalan Board where there are approximately 8 Guatemalans and 6 Americans who interact to create shared learning opportunities in Guatemala, we have secured grants to bring two Guatemalans to MN to study and to speak at conferences about our program. We have taken hundreds of people to Guatemala over the last 5 years to share in the experience of learning about the Mayan culture through learning about their ancient civilization, climbing their volcanoes, sharing experiences at orphanages, working in coffee fields, on a reforestation project, women's center project, spoon project, and housing projects to name a few.

Social Justice Education (SJE)

Although the basic tenets of social justice education apply to our program, there are several areas where we critically depart from the traditional thinking about what service *should* look like. Those areas of departure and an in depth look at SJE are beyond the scope of this paper, but deserve critical analysis and reflection. In general, SJE:

- Promotes emotional and intellectual learning opportunities.
- Expands comfort zones of all participants.
- Fosters an understanding of poverty that is safe and respectful for all participants.
- Promotes an environment for personal and small group reflection.
- Students explore roles as civic agents.
- Creates an opportunity to learn in an otherwise prohibitive context.
- Reflects an experiential pedagogy that requires reflection.¹

Accordingly, there are five key principles often associated with SJE:

1. Balance the emotional and cognitive components of the learning process.
2. Acknowledge and support the personal (the individual student's experience) while illuminating the systemic (the interactions among social groups).
3. Attend to social relations within the classroom.
4. Utilize reflection and experience as tools for student-centered learning.
5. Value awareness, personal growth, and change as outcomes of the learning process.¹

These SJE principles offer:

- Challenges for students and faculty.
- Opportunities for students to take personal responsibility for their own learning.
- Encouragement for participation in learning groups.
- Evidence of a need for respect toward each other, avoidance of blame and quick judgment.
- Individuals and others an opportunity to take shared responsibility for social justice in our world.¹

In an effort to promote SJE in the context of a service learning experience, most research indicates the importance of:

- Building relationships that require partners to take risks and expand comfort zones.
- All parties having ownership in the project and share responsibilities.
- Hands-on services which is required by all involved in the partnership.
- Communal labor as it builds relationship -- Communal labor implies strenuous physical labor and engagement.
- Active listening as critical to both *learning* and *servicing*.
- Preconceived notions of what it means "to serve" must be left in the classroom.
- People must participate with an open heart, generous spirit, and willingness to share one's life.

- The exchange needing to be equitable.
- Flexibility and willingness to deal with ambiguity as critical to the success of the partnership.
- The purpose of the partnership being clear, it should not focus on “being fun” (although fun is welcomed!).
- Rules and regulations must be clear and people must be *committed* to following them.
- Poverty, justice, impunity, land-rights, and country specific issues must be discussed and reflected upon prior to, during, and after the service-learning program.^{1, 7, 10}

Each of the above will be discussed in relative length during the session. As previously indicated, our program challenges some of the otherwise assumed roles regarding what it means “to serve.” For example, we have learned over the years that we serve the indigenous people by being an audience for them to share their expertise. Students grow intensely uncomfortable though when asked to serve in the capacity of a listener as they are socialized in a culture of “I have to *do something* for *them* in order to feel good about self.” One of the greatest challenges of teaching students has been asking them to consider a paradigm shift regarding what service looks like in a third world country or at home.

Learning Through Serving Philosophy

Moving from **charity** to *justice* . . .
 From **separation** to *connection* . . .
 From **ignorance** to *awareness* . . .
 From **hatred** to *understanding and peace*
 From **Bigotry** to **Diversity**
 And from **service** to a
true reciprocal sharing of one’s life

This philosophy is shared by an organization called Kids Without Borders that was born after Verhoye’s children journeyed to Guatemala several times and wanted to start a program that offered youth the opportunity to learn and serve in a third world country. Although that organization’s success is beyond the scope of this paper, it reflects the heuristic nature of programs like this.

Our Learning Through Serving program and partnership with the people of San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala reflects a shared responsibility to create, manage, and sustain life-long learning opportunities for all.

Mayan Principles and Values

According to Marie Medarda Castro (Co-Chair to Guatemala Board), the Mayan principles identified below were critical to take into consideration as we formed our partnership.

- Respect nature, human being, and the cosmos
- Fulfillment of our mission while on earth
- Respect for elders
- To be a part of the organization of the community
- The value of the word – qas qa tzij
- The ethic and transparency in our actions
- Responsibility to complete goals
- Precision and exactness in our actions
- Emphasizing the common welfare over our actions

Our Learning Through Serving program fully embraced these Mayan principles and is open to a reshaping and massaging of our program to ensure that we always serve the people of other lands how they want to be served, not we *think* they should be served.

Future Plans

Future plans for our Learning Through Serving program include expansion into other countries so that we may have service sites on every continent by 2012. We hope to expand our consortium to include dozens of schools, colleges, and universities throughout the country to expand our national community of social justice educators. Additionally, we hope to secure more grant money in the coming years to help expand our program and meet our long-term goals.

Annotated Bibliography

¹Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, (eds.). (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.

Authors focus on defining social justice education and offering insights into implementing it into curriculum. The book offers many examples resources for further study.

²Abravanel , S.A. *Building Community Through Service Learning: The Role of Community Partner*. Denver : Education Commission of the States, 2003
www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/44/03/4403.pdf

Using a service-learning course taught by Mike Walsh at Nestucca Valley Middle School in Beaver, OR, Abravanel walks the reader through: the definition of service-learning, the role of community organizations and agencies, the roles of the schools and the organization in the creation and maintenance of the partnership, what the organization or agency needs to do internally, and the challenges related to building and maintaining service-learning partnerships.

³Andolina, Molly, Krista Jenkins, Cliff Zukin, and Scott Keeter. "Habits from Home, Lessons from School: Influences on Youth Civic Engagement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 36, no. 2 (2003): 275-280. <http://www.apsanet.org/PS/april03/andolina.cfm>

In studying youth between the ages of 15 and 25 years-old, this research study focuses on the various influences on youth civic engagement which it's found, extends far beyond the classroom and families. Although there is no doubt that many youths are influenced by these factors, others are influenced by individual teachers, friends, religious institutions, political groups and policy organizations. Some conclusions are drawn between civic engagement training in adolescence and its influence on adult behavior.

⁴Billig, S.H. and Waterman, A. eds. *Studying Service-Learning Innovations in Education Research*. Mahwah (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003.

⁵Bowley, E. *The Minnesota Campus Compact Civic Engagement Study: Defining Civic Engagement in a New Century*. Saint Paul (MN): Minnesota Higher Education Services Office and Minnesota Campus Compact, 2003.

⁶Hirose-Wong, S.M. (1999). *Gateways to Democracy: Six Urban Community College Systems*. Eric Digest, ED438873.

<http://www.ericdigests.org/2000-4/democracy.htm>

Describes how urban community colleges face numerous challenges, the most notable of which is a student population largely comprised of individuals with one or more of the following characteristics: income below the poverty line, immigrant status, first-generation college student, a member of an ethnic minority group, in need of remediation, or whose first language is not English. By providing knowledge, skills, and support for upward mobility in society, these institutions are truly "gateways to democracy" for those who might otherwise be denied access to higher education. The digest summarizes the efforts in the Miami-Dade, Maricopa, Seattle, CUNY, Baltimore County, and Los Angeles community college districts to offer access and comprehensive, academically sound curricula to diverse groups of students.

⁷ National Campus Compact for syllabi bank & list of published resources
www.compact.org

"Campus Compact is a national coalition of more than 950 college and university presidents committed to the civic purposes of higher education. To support this civic mission,

Campus Compact promotes community service that develops students' citizenship skills and values, encourages partnerships between campuses and communities, and assists faculty who seek to integrate public and community engagement into their teaching and research,” (Compact Mission). This website takes a comprehensive look at civic engagement. It includes research on civic engagement, partnership information, resources, training, syllabi bank, funding information and much more.

⁸Eyler, J and Giles, D. *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

⁹Jacoby, B. ed. *Building Service-Learning Partnerships for the Future*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

¹⁰Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, published twice a year
www.umich.edu/~mjcs/

As stated on the MJCSL website, “The MJCSL is a national, peer-reviewed journal for college and university faculty and administrators, with an [editorial board](#) consisting of faculty from many academic disciplines and professional fields at the University of Michigan and other institutions of higher education around the country. The Michigan Journal provides a venue to intellectually stimulate educators around the issues pertinent to academic service-learning in higher education, as well as a venue to publish scholarly articles specifically for a service-learning audience.”

¹¹Vogelgesang, L.J., Drummond, M. and Gilmartin, S.K. *How Higher Education is Integrating Diversity and Service Learning: Findings from Four Case Studies*. San Francisco : California Campus Compact, 2003.
www.sfsu.edu/~cacc/downloads/ideas/pdf