Service Learning: Action Research Component
Phase III: "Data Collection"
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Below are my general findings following a review of the "Data Collection" assignments submitted by students in the January 2008 and February 2009 Teaching American History Grant Module titled *Civil Rights and Service Learning*. The data for this report includes submissions by 77 teachers of students in grades 3, 4, and 5.

Source of Data for Reflection

The reflections in this report represent teacher reactions to engaging in a service learning teaching strategy in the classroom after approximately four weeks of instruction. Note that the nature of the schools is such that social studies education is relegated to a very brief period of the school week and many teachers were preparing for state-wide high-stakes tests while engaged in their service learning projects. Therefore, their progress to date is more representative of teachers who might be in their first few days of a service learning project. After the four weeks, teachers have probably engaged their students in approximately three to ten lessons on the topic. Their assignment was to show progress from the assignment submitted the previous week. In many cases, their reports reflect only one additional assignment.

The requirements for this phase of the student's action research project were:

> **"Data Collection**
> This post is similar to the previous post. It should show progress students made over the last week of the project. It will include three of the same items from the previous post, but all sections must evidence additional student progress (including additional artifacts). The post must also include an updated reflection on methods of relating the project to history and your feelings about service learning as a teaching method. Include the following:
> 1. Data Collection
> 2. Artifacts
> 3. Reflections-to-date."

Observations

Below are the general observations gleaned after reviewing all teacher assignments. While reading each assignment, I developed a list of common themes using grounded theory. Then, I identified quotes relating to each of those themes. This paper reports on the analyzed data under each theme.

Types of Projects

Example projects completed in the classrooms appear below:
- ➤ Donations to a hospital's children's ward
- ➤ Paper recycling

- ➤ Encouragement letters to students to help pass high stakes tests
- ➤ Educating others about healthy eating
- ➤ Empowering students to treat each other kindly
- ➤ "Turn off the TV" campaign
- ➤ Fixing child abuse
- ➤ Helping animal shelters with items and adoptions
- ➤ Collecting "Box Tops" or "Nestle Water" for an unspecified purpose
- ➤ Collecting pop tops for the Ronald McDonald House
- ➤ Collecting clothing for children in Mexico
- ➤ Teaching about and defeating bullying on campus
- ➤ Planting a tree at school
- ➤ Donating food to a food bank
- ➤ Helping the elderly
- ➤ Peer mediation
- ➤ Campaigning for more nutritious lunches
- ➤ Cleaning the school campus
- ➤ Collecting gum, drawings, and cards to send to servicemen and women overseas
- ➤ Curtailing drunk driving

Student Reactions

The teachers were incredibly impressed with the quality of excitement, "genuine interest," and engagement demonstrated by their students. They found their students eager to come to school early and stay late, and many students already asked about doing another service learning project after completing their current project. One teacher wrote: "They cannot help but want to be a part of this."

While most teachers echoed this response, a small percentage still had difficulty motivating some of their students. One teacher reported that her students maintained a "what's in it for me" attitude because there was no concrete reward. Another reported that some of her students were "not taking the project seriously." In a classroom where all students were enjoying the project, a third teacher stated: "I still have one girl who is so absorbed in herself, and I am waiting for her to see 'the light'." In still other cases, students were eager to help, but they "struggl[ed] with the idea of asking the community to help."

One incident truly touched the heart of the teacher. After discussing their project, a teacher noticed one of her students crying. When asked, the girl said "she didn't realize how [helping the elderly] would make her feel and didn't know she was capable of making someone else's life better and what kind of affect it would have on her." Overall, teachers found that students were "really starting to understand the issue that they are facing" and they were embracing it in a positive and passionate manner.

Teacher Reactions

Teacher responses were also overwhelmingly positive at this point in the process. In fact, all teachers reflected positively on the experience of using service learning though many were distraught with factors negatively influencing the progress of their projects. One teacher wrote:

> "…there have been times… when I've been more excited about this project than even my students… We have been so busy in class getting ready for the upcoming [high-stakes] test that I thought getting this project done would be a huge hassle. Not only has it not been a hassle, but I believe the students… have gained so much."

Teachers even found the opportunity an adventure of learning for themselves by noting that there were unpredictable "twists and turns" and that "[e]very twist and turn in this project presents new skills to be learned or used." They enjoyed "steer[ing] conversation[s]" to help students see the next steps in the process.

Teachers also found themselves impressed with the quality of their students' work by making comments such as "I was surprised at how well they worked together" and "I was excited that they were so into their research that some of the needed more room." One teacher was "very impressed" that her students "did this on their work" (e.g., organizing themselves into groups) and another was "enjoying the conversations that [she was] overhearing."

The biggest concern teachers had about the project was time and timing. Many of their schools limited the amount of time teachers could teach curriculum not mandated by the school for the purpose of increasing annual yearly progress in math, reading, and writing. One teacher summed up what many were feeling:

> "The days of being able to do themed lessons [are] gone and so is being able to fit in things like service learning, even though it is proven that the more you can tie to a child's life about the learning they are doing the more they remember what they have been taught."

Another added: "… you don't always have the leisure to do what is best for the kids." Despite the fact that teachers were integrating lessons and teaching skills needed for high-stakes tests, there was a belief that their administrators would not allow this manner of teaching. Some administrators provided teachers permission to do the project, but the teacher could only engage in project related tasks (even those matching core curricular standards) during a twenty-minute block three times per week. One teacher expressed outright anger toward the tests while many expressed an eagerness to "get past the testing" so their students could better focus on the projects.

Besides adhering to strict instructional methods required before high stakes tests, other issues complicated teachers' abilities to work on the projects. Some cited examples include administrative schedule changes, state team reviews (during which teachers would have to teach a specific curriculum all day), absences due to teacher training, interim assessments, and addressing school improvement plan goals. Other teachers were frustrated by the time it took to get permission to engage in different parts of the project (e.g., it took four days to procure permission to take pictures of the school cafeteria and

ask lunch personnel student-developed research questions). And, still others, worked in departmental teaching models so were at the whim of other teachers' schedules (because of testing preparation) to be able to work on the project.

Instructional Strategies

Teachers integrated numerous instructional strategies into their service learning projects. For example, many teachers used adjunct resources such as videos. Some watched videos on the topic of their project (e.g., hunger, bullying), others watched general videos on helping others (e.g., Planet Earth's "Saving the Species," Farmer Insurance's "Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things"), and still others watched videos on the civil rights movement to show the connection between creating historical change and the change in which the students were presently engaged. Teachers also integrated homework assignments relating to the projects, but different than those usually sent home. For example, students had to find newspaper articles about homelessness and animal rescue, they had to visit a grocery store to read labels on foods, and they had to keep a daily food log. Surprisingly, several teachers noted that fewer students turned in these homework assignments than usually completed the homework. One teacher postulated "it might be because this was a different kind" of homework than usually given. Despite this lack of completing some homework assignments, some teachers found increased attendance during the course of the project.

Teachers sometimes used worksheets they either created on their own or used from resources provided as part of the module. In one case, a teacher used a *Project Citizen* worksheet to help students understand their selected problem, gain background knowledge about the problem, determine who should take responsibility for the problem, and learn whether there was already a law in place relating to their problem. Another fifth grade teacher who also used the *Project Citizen* worksheets stated: "I loved using the *Project Citizen*… worksheets…, but I think I will alter them to better fit my needs next year." She found the worksheets to be "too advanced" in some respects and they failed to offer students enough room for writing responses.

They also used technology. Primarily, students used the Internet for their research, but they used common hardware for data collection and software programs for developing deliverables and recording their process. For example, some students used digital cameras. A teacher reported: "… the students seemed to take it more seriously the moment I took out the camera." Another noted using a document camera for brainstorming as a whole class. And, still another, used digital recording.

Several classes used slideshow software (and the program's wizard feature) to develop scrapbooks. Within the slideshows, they included project artifacts such as a class picture, a project narrative, and the most persuasive essay written by a student to support their project. Other classes used word processing and page layout software to make flyers and brochures to send home. One teacher wrote:

> "It is impossible to deny the technological experience [the project] is giving the students, research[ing] information and phone numbers, working with computer

software such as Microsoft Word, Powerpoint *[sic]*, and Publisher, as well as finding quotes and pictures. It has also exposed some students to a digital camera."

Writing was the most common integrator for the project. Many teachers began their service learning unit by having students used thinking maps to brainstorm possible service project topics. They then placed students into groups, assigned each group one of the topics, and required students to write persuasive essays arguing for their selected topic. Students also wrote letters, both friendly and business.

Learning

It was clear from many teachers that the students were very excited to work on their projects. In some cases, teachers had to stop their students from working temporarily to teach concepts needed to continue with their projects. For example, one teacher found his students wanted to start educating the school about the topic they had selected (nutrition) before they realized they needed to do research on their own before being prepared to educate others. He also explained to them that they needed to ensure all the information they shared was accurate, a concept they had not considered before "jumping right in."

Teachers were excited about this energy and were able to see students learning from one another at a level surprising to the teachers.

> "As I circulated, some groups were deep in discussion about home foreclosures and the cause-effect relationship between foreclosures and overcrowding of animal shelters while others were discussing solutions for getting people off of the streets through creating programs that provide shelter, food, clothing, and job placement to the homeless." (-A fifth grade teacher)

The students were learning from their peers and passions and they were eager to learn about their project topics. For example, one class learned that 50% of the animals in their community are strays and 1,000 pets are euthanized annually. The students who learned these facts "started out this project because [they] always have random stray dogs on… campus." The project helped them realize "the problem is so much bigger."

Teachers saw themselves as "facilitating an experience" that enabled them to integrate many content areas and one noted that integration was made easier when students took ownership of the project. Some of the cited interdisciplinary skills learned through the process included:

➤ Mathematics (making diagrams of the school grounds and finding its perimeter to determine where to plant a tree);
➤ Language arts (grammar/punctuation, communication);
➤ Civic skills (negotiating, compromising, responsibility, group collaboration);
➤ Business skills (time management, goal setting, creativity);
➤ Personal skills (the counselor trained students to be peer mediators);
➤ Languages (writing pamphlets in both Spanish and English); and,
➤ Special skills such as music composition (the music teacher helped students write a tune to accompany their lyrics).

Project Ownership

One benefit of a service learning approach is that teachers can release classroom control to their students while ensuring students are still learning required curriculum. At first, some teachers were unwilling to release control (e.g., one teacher created a survey for parents to report on whether their students were learning instead of having the students create the survey). Likewise, some students were unsure how to accept the control their teachers offered:

> "They are waiting for me to give them the right answer. They haven't quite realized that this is all up to them. I am hoping as we move more through this process their thinking changes."

Other teachers, perhaps farther along in the process, noted that their students had accepted control: "Generally speaking, the kids don't even see it as 'work' because it is not something I am teaching to them. They are in control, they decide what needs to happen (for the most part) and so they enjoy putting in the effort." In some cases, the project was clearly a joint effort between the teacher and students. For example, one teacher agreed to help students solicit businesses for help by "going to a couple" on her own.

In cases where students were able to accept the control given to them, they were very adept at leading themselves. One teacher was worried about gaining 100% participation by her students, but the students themselves assigned tasks to everyone. Another teacher wrote:

> "They rarely asked for my help, but of course made sure their decisions were okay before proceeding to speak with the [presenter]. The students even contacted the office to make sure our assembly would work out okay."

Ultimately, the teachers tried to serve as a guide for their students. They massaged student ideas into feasible, workable plans. For example, one class was "a little stuck on raising money [for their main project goal], but not describing how or what we would do with any of the money raised." This is where the teacher-facilitator role became crucial.

American History

Because the module content focused on the civil rights era, teacher reflections were to include a statement about how they included history instruction (specifically related to the 1950s ad 1960s) to their service learning projects. They referenced children's books (provided by the module grant), the content book they were required to read, and other adjunct resources such as handouts provided electronically, websites recommended in class, and a *Teaching Tolerance* video on Rosa Parks. After watching the video, one teacher noted: "The class became somber and I feel that the reason for the civil rights movement became even more real for them [that] day." They learned that Rosa Parks prepared before taking her stand and the students chose to prepare as part of their service learning projects. Linking projects to Rosa Parks' experience was even humorous at times:

"Students who were in favor of having vending machines felt that they should have equal access just like teachers do in the teacher's lounge and [they] linked it to Rosa Parks. I found myself laughing out loud…"

Some teachers taught about the civil rights movement by introducing their students to primary sources including a video of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech. In addition to learning the content of the speech and the related history, one class was able to use the speech to better inform other parts of their project:

"Our class discussed the *I Have a Dream* speech we had watched and discussed reasons why that speech moved so many people. The kids brought up the passion he spoke with and how he seemed to really believe in the words he was saying. He made his message personal. From there we talked about how they could use similar techniques in their speeches [to persuade each other why to vote for their causes]."

In addition to relating service projects to civil rights, two teachers related the concept of service to the American Revolution and the Boston Tea Party by telling how early Americans banded together to form a united force against the British. The teachers taught that everyone mattered.

Beginning the Process

Most teachers used similar methods (brainstorming, persuasive writing) to have their students begin their service project. After one brainstorming session, it was common for "students [to get] back into their groups and decide… what feasible steps could be taken to solve [their] problem." This process continued throughout the project. For example, one class started their project by writing five songs. Upon realizing the delivery of five songs was not feasible, they collapsed their songs into two. This type of small group work followed by large group collaboration was common across reports.

Though action plans were discussed in the module lecture, few teachers reported actually developing and using action plans. In one case, a teacher reported that developing the action plan took three 50-minute periods. Given the time constraints (previously mentioned) and their inexperience with using service learning as an instructional strategy, it appears many teachers simply skipped the step of developing an action plan. In one case, the teacher had students work in small groups on individual action plans and then the class worked as a whole group to develop a single, final plan. Another teacher reported spending much time revising the original plan. Students realized that they were about to turn the ideas written on their classroom board into reality.

Unintended Consequences

There were many positive unintended consequences resulting from the project. Some of these appear below:

➤ The projects brought students closer together as a class (note this was a major theme in many teachers' previous reports).

➤ Parents expressed increased interest in what their children were doing at school and offered help without being prompted.

➤ Special "things" happened. For example, McGruff the Crime Dog made a special appearance in one class because he learned the students were teaching other about bullies. In another case, the principal reported that the following school year would completely focus on service learning.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that many teachers were originally disappointed that they would have to try a new instructional strategy in their class as part of this module (particularly because the module coincided with high-stakes testing), the end result was incredibly positive. One teacher wrote of the experience: "This is truly one of the first classes I have ever learned something from or used in the classroom." Ultimately, the experiences of all classes was extremely positive and that positive attitude "spilled" onto other parts of the academic day.

"When they are energized about one part of the day, it definitely changes their perspectives about being in school. I also like how the project builds cohesiveness as a class. The classroom environment becomes more inviting for them, and they are more inclined to be focused during other classes. Especially when I can use time to work on the service project as a carrot."