Service Learning: Action Research Component
Phase I: "Plan of Action"
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Below are general findings after reading the "Plan of Action" assignments submitted by teachers in the January 2008 and February 2009 Teaching American History Grant modules titled *Civil Rights and Service Learning*. The data include submissions by 85 teachers of students in grades three, four, and five. The first iteration of the module included 32 teachers and the second included 53 teachers. The report does not differentiate between submissions by grade level; nor does it differentiate between module iteration. All teachers self-selected to participate in each module and no students were enrolled in both modules.

All module participants completed the Phase I assignment, but some were unable to complete the entire project. Some reasons for non-completion included track breaks occurring within a 12-month school year (occurring during the teaching of this module) and administrative disapproval of participation in the process; therefore, data from some participants included in this initial report are not represented in later reports.

Before completing the assignment recorded in this report, students reviewed materials within Teaching Tolerance's *Mighty Times: The Legend of Rosa Parks* kit, Unit Four of the Tiger Woods Foundation's *Start Something* Curriculum, and a one-page description of elements of service learning that appeared within the Teaching Tolerance *One Survivor Remembers* teaching kit. In addition, they had (in the second case) received children's books for their classrooms relating to the civil rights movement as well as a book titled the *Civil Rights Movement* by Bruce Dierenfield (2004).

This report reflects on the first phase, "Plan of Action," of the four-phase assignment. The full assignment required teachers engage in action research as they completed a service learning project with students in their respective classrooms. The requirements for the first phase of the student's action research project stated:
> "Project Plan
>> Begin your first post before you approach the concept of service learning with your students. This post will have four sections:
>> 1. Try a New Practice: In this section, discuss whether you have engaged in service-based learning in your classroom in the past and with what results. Provide a detailed and sincere description about how you feel about service learning and how you feel about integrating this teaching strategy into your classroom.
>> 2. Incorporating Hopes and Concerns: List your hopes and concerns about this assignment and about integrating service learning into your instruction over the next few weeks. After preparing your list, explain some of your hopes and concerns in detail. For example, tell how you plan to connect the student-selected project to the standards you plan to teach over the next month. Explain how this may conflict with your current teaching methodologies and how you will resolve these issues. Mention if you have a preference for the type of project your students might select.

3. Data Collection Methods: For this assignment, you will need to show evidence of your classroom project and student learning. Propose an outline of the method you intend to use to document your students' progress. List the types of artifacts you anticipate may serve as good samples of student work and how you will display those artifacts within your posts (e.g., digital pictures of student work, attaching Inspiration concept maps).

4. Reflections-to-Date: State how you will integrate the Civil Rights Movement and other historical events and people to your students service project. How will you ensure students see the connection between what great leaders in America's past have done and what they are doing through creating change in their own community?"

Though both module iterations involved a hybrid teaching format, at least one major difference occurred between the first and second modules. During the first iteration, teachers received this assignment as an online requirement before the first class meeting. In the second iteration, teachers received the assignment following the first class meeting. This made a significant difference in student responses; however, that difference is not reflected in the data below. Suffice it to report, teachers having had the opportunity to experience a class lecture, an opportunity to ask questions about service learning, and an introduction to service project examples before completing the assignment were much more comfortable with engaging in service learning. This difference was so pronounced that a large number of teachers in the first module rejected the idea of engaging in service learning in their classrooms while very few rejected the instructional methodology in the second iteration. This suggests that teachers should receive an introduction to service learning in a face-to-face setting before expecting them to even consider engaging in the practice in their respective classrooms.

Observations

These reflections will appear in five sections: Pre-Module Participant Engagement with Service Learning Opportunities; General Reflections about Service Learning; Concerns of Participants about Instituting Service Learning within Their Classrooms; Perceived Benefits of Adding a Service Learning Component to Instruction; Teacher Hopes for the Addition of the Service Learning Component; and, Possible Artifacts for Use with Service Learning Action Research.

Pre-Module Participant Engagement with Service Learning Opportunities

In the first assignment question, teachers described whether they had utilized service learning in the past and some reported they had never even heard of service learning. Though not asked, several students also chose to report on their personal experiences with community service. Many reported having engaged in personal community service events (often during their own schooling) or school-wide community service projects such as canned food drives. A graph of prior use of service learning in the classroom appears below.

Participant Engagement with Service Learning Before Module
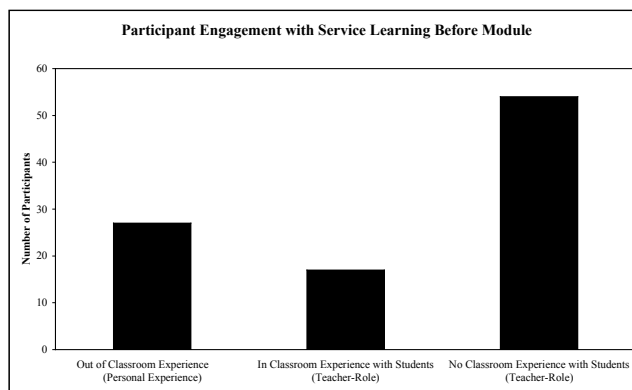
Note that almost 30% of the teacher sample had engaged in community service of some type in the past, but had not engaged in service learning. When considering those who have used service learning and those who did not, the ratio of non-users to users jumps to nearly 5:1.

Clearly, teachers in the module did not commonly use service learning, yet they were intrigued and excited about the idea. One fifth grade teacher wrote: "Thinking back on my experience, I realize how much I really should be getting these kids involved in service projects at this age. They are at an age where they want to have more responsibility and feel like they have a say in the world. This would give them that opportunity." Another wrote: "The fact that I have not provided the chance for my students to make their voices heard makes me realize that up until now I do not practice what I preach."

General Reflections about Service Learning

Service Learning as Citizenship Training
Overall, teachers believed that including service learning components in their instruction would assist students in learning about their community while teaching those students how to be "better" citizens. Additionally, teachers and students were motivated by a call to action by other students (i.e., the "Kids Paying It Forward" invitation to engage in service learning) and reviewing materials about service learning (e.g., Teaching Tolerance and Tiger Wood Foundation resources).Nonetheless, there was collective concern about engaging in the practice because a) of the time lost to other content, and b) the pressure to prepare students for high-stakes testing (occurring around the same time as the module).

Cross-Curricular Integration
The concept of cross-curricular integration with service learning brought mixed reactions Some saw the connections with ease while others experienced deep concern over making the connections. Specific content objectives cited included letter writing and graphing. They noted that service learning methods involved a movement from "paper and pencil" methods to "real world" opportunities and saw the projects as "authentic," allowing students to see "how their actions affect real people." In addition to learning these concepts, teachers felt service learning would provide opportunities to teach research skills, problem solving, organizational skills, and note taking. They also saw that it would teach empathy in exchange for self-centeredness. Teaching empathy, however, placed them in conflict because of the criterion-based testing occurring shortly after the conclusion of the module. Furthermore, some teachers, having been

trained and experienced with rote instructional methodologies perceived service learning instruction as outside their teaching "comfort levels" and regularly expressed apprehension about implementing the service learning with their students. Many were even prohibited from veering from scripted instruction.

Teachers were more likely to report their plans to integrate reading, writing, and math with their projects. Despite their apprehension, many teachers expressed excitement about the opportunity to engage in a new instructional strategy. One teacher hoped that this excitement would reflect on and create excitement in the students.

Student Demographics
There was also concern about the abilities of students because many were from at-risk schools. One third grade teacher wrote: "My biggest concern is the low reading level of my students." Some teachers reported their school populations were on 100% free lunch and that there were safety issues when outside of the school's fences.

Projects Making Change
Teachers believed that small actions could lead to big changes and did not feel that they had to engage in "big" projects—they just had to have their students engage in "something." To do so, some viewed service learning as an opportunity to engage in community collaboration. For example, they listed possibilities of working with local libraries and the media. Others foresaw their students doing projects that were more self-contained (e.g., school-based recycling programs). They also saw a relationship between Civil Rights leaders and contemporary service learning in schools. They viewed service learning as an opportunity to help students reflect on historically-significant individuals, and believed that students would begin to see these individuals as personal and positive role models. Some teachers also made connections with the recent presidential election and other leaders of change (e.g., environmental leaders). They also saw a connection between the projects their students might select and the socio-economic status of the local school community. For example, they felt that students in an area with a low socio-economic status that is typically the beneficiary of service by other organizations might be unable to see ways to serve others. A teacher wrote: "They seem to have little trouble relating problems of the past when they learn about them. My students experience discrimination, poverty, and lack of resources. Many of their parents are unable to vote or experience rights of citizenship in this country. They can understand what it is like to be separate but 'unequal' in society." In this climate, "[t]he efficacy of service learning cannot be understated especially once students are made aware of what others have accomplished," wrote a fifth grade teacher.

Concerns of Participants about Instituting Service Learning within Their Classrooms

Being Overburdened
Teachers feel overburdened with responsibilities inside and outside of the classroom. For example, out of the classroom, teachers engage in conferences as presenters and attendees. In the classroom, they are burdened with assessment requirements and school or grade level activities such as the science fair. As such, many felt a need to "sneak" the project into their instructional time, or they felt they might be reprimanded for not teaching using administratively mandated

instructional methods. To address this need, some teachers were concerned with finding cross-curricular integrative techniques aligning with the project.

Some teachers were concerned about the amount of preparation time the project would require. In cases where teachers did feel they could fit the project into their daily instruction, some were logistically concerned about when and how to fit it into the instructional day. The need for instructional time to complete the project was the overwhelming concern of most teachers as was a concern over the focus on high-stakes testing[1] in their schools and their perception (or that of their principals) that service learning would not support learning that would positively affect standardized test scores. Teachers felt a lack of curricular and instructional control in many cases. Some teachers expressed concern over whether parents and the school's administration would support the project. This was particularly true in one case because of the high population of students speaking English as a second language.

Some teachers were concerned about the lack of resource funding available to complete a service learning project and some were concerned about engaging in the community off the school campus because of physical safety issues (e.g., local shootings). Others worried that completion of the projects would require out-of-class time and students would have to participate in after-school sessions. Mostly, however, recognizing that service learning required more student-led, teacher-facilitated instruction than teacher-led instruction, some teachers expressed concern that they would be using a teaching style outside of their "comfort zones." Most expressed concern because this method was uncomfortable and therefore incited "stress," "anxious[ness]," "apprehensi[on]," and "nervous[ness]." One teacher expressed concern because of the amount of effort required to teach using the new method.

Many teachers expressing this apprehension did so because they were required to teach a scripted or "approved" instructional strategies and this teaching method did not align with the required teaching techniques. In many of these cases, teachers were limited in the amount of time they were permitted to teach social studies in the classroom and one student expressed in class that her principal told her she was "not allowed" to teach social studies until after district-wide criterion reference testing. The lack of time dedicated to social studies instruction was a repeated theme. Their assignments also noted a concern over connecting the project to required language arts and mathematics standards. One teacher wrote: "[e]ven with fancy explanations and integrated lesson plans it will be difficult to explain how this project is helping my students succeed on high stakes tests." To address this issue, several teachers mentioned making the project extra-curricular or using it as homework assignments. Their frustration was common and exemplified in one teachers comment: "Why not put away the textbook for an hour or so a day to practice what they have learned…" Another wrote: "Then there is of course the usual feeling of wondering if your administration will hassle you since you are doing a project…, or, in other words, you aren't exactly teaching to the test."

Some teachers were concerned that their students would not be interested in the project and would either lose interest in the class project and not remain engaged with the project for its

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[1] Note that this module, taught in February to align with African-American month, also coincided with criterion-reference testing for some grades.

duration or would not want to participate in the project at all. Another concern was about the abilities of their students to sustain interest in the project through its duration. Some worried their students would not know enough about their local communities to effectively brainstorm and enact possible projects. Some even noted fears of failing their students: "I am concerned about finding the right project for my class: one that makes a real impact and doesn't cost a lot of money." Another wrote: "I'm a little worried I am going to do it all wrong, and the end result will be that my students are all frustrated and worn out. Mostly, however, I am excited to begin."

Many teachers were worried they were required to complete the service project within the five weeks of the module. This was not the case for the assignment, but the assignment instructions did not make this evident and the students had not yet met face-to-face to ask questions about the assignment. Even when told in class that the projects might extend past the five weeks, some teachers still expressed worry.

Despite all these concerns, most teachers were excited about the possibility of using service learning with the students.

Perceived Benefits of Adding a Service Learning Component to Instruction

Some teachers felt that through participating in actual service projects, students would internalize the need to make a difference. Teachers felt that service learning would provide a motivational method that would offer students greater creativity in the classroom, opportunities for critical thinking, student autonomy, real life applications for content learning, provide opportunities to reflect on student accomplishments, create class cohesiveness, and offer ownership over their own communities and the project. Teachers believed that service learning would help students gain a sense of accomplishment while permitting them to see concrete results of the work they complete. In terms of moral development, teachers saw service learning as a method for developing a "balanced sense of community pride" and instilling a sense of personal value.

In terms of instructional benefits, teachers were pleased with the "hands-on" approach of service learning and felt this would serve as a motivational instructional tool. Some believed the project would help students see the connection between the standards-based content previously taught and real-world uses for that content. Furthermore, they hoped the process would have unforeseen gains: "I can never know their full potential (or mine) until we at least try it." And, they do not feel academics, alone, will allow students to demonstrate that full potential. "I think this is going to be such a fantastic opportunity not just for my student[s] but also for me… because often times as a teacher we don't always get to see the things our students are capable of."

Teacher Hopes for the Addition of the Service Learning Component

Teachers hoped that their students would "open their hearts and minds" to receive this alternative lesson type. Teachers hoped their students would learn to be advocates of positive change through their study of the past and that they would pass what they learn through their experience to others (including their families and friends). They also hoped that students would learn to think of others instead of only themselves. Teachers hoped service learning would have an impact on individual student character development in a way that would help their students to

always remember the project. They hoped that development would include global perspectives and personal empathy. One teacher wrote that although service learning techniques are "time-consuming," they are "worth it" because the instruction "gives back to students in a different, last way." One dissenting teacher wrote: "I don't know that… the classroom, is where this should be started," instead recommending service learning occur within a home environment.

Teachers hoped to inspire their students to participate in future service opportunities and to be motivated to either continue their class service project or other service projects in their own homes. They also hoped the project would motivate students to engage in academic activity beyond what is required at school. Teachers wanted their students to be "excited" about the project and enjoy learning. They hoped that this unit might provide a "break from assessments." Teachers hoped that they could create a "smooth flow" between the service learning project and the rest of their curriculum and that flow would include cross-curricular components. They also hoped teachers would take ownership of the projects: "I know they will rise to the occasion and give from the heart because they own the idea." One difficulty for some teachers was relinquishing control to their students: "I [am] going to try to keep my mouth shut as they brainstorm."

Finally, teachers wanted students to find positive role models from the Civil Rights Era leaders they planned to study and wanted students to connect those leaders to themselves.

Possible Artifacts (as reported by teachers) for Use with Service Learning Action Research

Teachers identified the following possible artifacts for reporting on the progress of their students' service learning projects. These artifacts would serve as the basis for their action research projects. Examples appear below.
- ➤ Thinking maps
- ➤ Student- and teacher-prepared journals, logs, and reflections
- ➤ Digital pictures and video
- ➤ Transcripts of student-created speeches
- ➤ Interview questions and responses
- ➤ Artistic renderings such as posters and collages
- ➤ Culminating projects such as PowerPoint slideshows, virtual museums, scrapbooks, and portfolios
- ➤ Student-generated letters and response letters
- ➤ A class website or blog devoted to the project
- ➤ Interactive bulletin boards
- ➤ Traditional tests (including pre- and post-tests
- ➤ Pre-and post-project teacher reflection
- ➤ School newspaper articles
- ➤ School television broadcasts
- ➤ Digital songs

References

Dierenfield. (2004). *The civil rights movement*: Longman.