

# From Pennies to Praxis: A Service Learning Model for Pre Service Teacher Candidates

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*Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.  
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr*

Service learning is a practice that blends community service with instruction. It provides opportunities for students to actively examine real world issues/problems within the context of the community – the world’s classroom. Instruction, service and reflection are the guideposts of a service learning experience. Therefore these distinctions differentiate service learning from simple volunteerism or single community service projects. If the constructivist view of learning rests on the premise that learning is the active construction of knowledge, then service learning would be the approach that embodies the essence of constructivism.

## **Service Learning as Pedagogy**

McCarthy (2003) identified three critical attributes of the service learning: experience, reflection, and knowledge. As McCarthy (2003) notes these components suggest a ‘mutual dependence and interconnection’ (page 1).

## ABSTRACT

This article captures a service learning initiative that blends an existing national program designed to teach economic principles to K-12 students with elementary education teacher candidates enrolled in a social studies methods course. The initiative gives candidates the hands-on experience of teaching national and state objectives in the area of economics, supplies the volunteer base the organization needs to sustain its local program, and gives local elementary schools an additional resource in the area of economics. Candidates’ reactions, the arrangement and the lessons learned are shared. Findings suggest that teacher candidates develop positive dispositions toward service learning, develop beginning pedagogical practices of efficacy, and reinforce their decision to teach.

Table 1. Service Learning Framework

Attribute	Service Learning Connection
Experience	Gained from involvement and may include positive/negative activities
Knowledge	Created by students during involvement and is shaped by prior experiences or lack thereof
Reflection	Contextualized way of examining experience and requires interaction with environment

As a result of embedding a service learning experience within a beginning clinical nursing course, Sedlak et. al (2003) discovered that beginning nursing students developed and used critical thinking skills: ‘The (students’) experience fostered self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-reflection’ (p. 102). The students provided needed service to the community, broadened their field specific knowledge base as well as gained personal reward for the work in their communities.

Because service learning carries a potentially double positive outcome (benefit to community served and benefit to learner engaged in the service) the impact on the community served must be considered along with the impact on the learner. As such, Rosner-Salzar (2003) emphasized the importance of service learning experiences intended for multicultural settings. The author suggests that future service providers need intense opportunities to work with diverse populations to truly authenticate their learning, improve their multicultural awareness and possibly affect social change. These types of experiences not only increase the likelihood that these future service providers would approach their professions empowered to affect change and possibly better understand the populations they will work with. As a pedagogical strategy, service learning in the college classroom has a considerable amount of potential

### **Transformative Teacher Education Pedagogy**

In teacher education, Wineberg (2003) observes that the opportunity for service learning to foster opportunities for civic engagement and responsibility should not go ignored by departments and schools of education. During pre-student teaching experiences, teacher candidates can gain an invaluable experience through opportunities to ‘get to know their communities and where their students come from’ (pg. 3). One of the desired outcomes of embedding service-learning experiences in teacher education is the notion of giving candidates this opportunity having a trickle-down effect on their own repertoire of pedagogical strategies. Therefore, this process would potentially build the capacity of civic responsibility in their future classrooms.

In a descriptive account of research conducted on an organized service learning project embedded in a course for early childhood preservice teachers, Chen (2004) discovered an evolution of perception regarding the experience. Initially the preservice

teachers in Chen's study held negative impressions of the requirement. The students were doubtful and unconvinced about the projects' role and potential to impact their learning. However by the completion of the service projects in the course Chen's data show that the preservice teachers identified an increased self-awareness and overall feeling of empowerment from the opportunity. Additionally the students saw the potential of service learning experiences in their own teaching in the future.

In a very similar yet different account, Shastri (2003) documented the results of a study of undergraduate teacher candidates who were required to complete service learning projects in an educational psychology course. The experience required the future teachers to maintain experience journals, write reflections and complete free writing responses. Through analysis of the documents the author determined that overall the experience reinforced the candidates' desire to teach.

This paper describes the findings of a study conducted of an organized service learning project embedded in a elementary social studies methods course for undergraduate teacher candidates. The study was designed to address the following evaluative questions: (1) How do preservice teacher candidates respond initially to a prearranged service learning project? (2) How do preservice teacher candidates perceive their involvement in a prearranged service learning project at the conclusion of their participation? And (3) How do preservice teacher candidates perceive the significance of service learning projects at the conclusion of their own service learning experience

## **Project Design**

The objective of this collaboration was three-fold: (1) to create a service learning project for elementary education teacher candidates that would give them hands-on opportunities to teach social studies related curricula to elementary students, (2) to increase and sustain the local volunteer base for a non-profit organization, and (3) provide a classroom resource for local public schools.

The non-profit's vision is 'to ensure that every child has a fundamental understanding of the free enterprise system' ([Junior Achievement](#), 2005). The program seeks to educate school age children on the principles of economics and business and its daily influence on their lives. Representatives from the national organization's local branch (JA) approached the teacher education program at the university about the possibility of a partnership. The social studies methods professor worked with the local coordinator to design a service-learning project that was mutually beneficial for each party (organization, public schools, and teacher education program). The professor's primary concern as it related to this potential partnership centered on how this initiative would serve to enrich and reinforce the objectives of the social studies methods course.

It was decided that students enrolled in the Social Studies for the Elementary Classroom Course during their junior year of methods coursework would have an organized service learning project embedded in their course. Among their other course requirements, students would become consultants for the organization. In their role as

consultant, candidates would be responsible for delivering the JA curriculum to their assigned grade level. Each grade level has 5 lessons that cover the economics principles that are developmentally appropriate for that age group and are aligned with national and state standards for social studies and economics. Service to the organization, service to the schools, opportunity to examine elementary social studies content, and opportunity to experience curriculum planning were all attributes of this initiative.

While the curriculum came with lesson plans, manipulatives, media, and other materials; candidates are expected to modify their lessons to the degree necessary to make the curriculum fit the learner. The idea was not to have teacher candidates learn how to regurgitate a stock lesson plan, it was however to have them begin the process of actual curriculum planning, gaining first-hand knowledge of the multiple ways classroom teachers must explore the questions related to planning for a group of students each day across disciplines. Additionally, the project gave candidates the opportunity to gain experience with how to use pre-assessments, observations, informal assessments and student reaction to shape their instruction.

## **Participants**

4 cohorts of students completed the service learning project with a total of 48 candidates.

Each candidate did the following as it related to the project:

- met with their assigned teacher to set a visitation schedule, review social studies curricula, give an overview of the curricula,
- conducted a pre-teaching visit to observe the classroom teacher's management style, administer a pre-assessment and get to know students,
- reviewed state social studies curricula for their grade level, the organization's curriculum in its entirety, and identified supplemental information as needed,
- created a reflection journal, planned and taught their first lesson,
- completed an initial reflection exercise to assess the success of the first lesson and reassessed their teaching methods based upon reflection,
- taught subsequent lessons, continued reflection cycle, modified lessons to accommodate student diversity and interests,
- videotaped and observed one lesson and then complete a reflection,
- administer post assessment, and

- completed a final reflection exercise that captured summative reactions to the project.

During this project, candidates met each week during the semester for their on-campus class to address general theory, issues, and activities related to teaching social studies in the elementary classroom. One full class meeting was devoted to a training session given by the organization which was hosted on location at the partnership elementary school, the site where the collaborative was housed during the spring semester. While a portion of each classroom meeting was devoted to debriefing on the service-learning project and its progress, the other facets of the course were priority. The service learning project was not the sole focus of the course. As a result, the service or sacrifice piece of this project is very distinct because candidates are responsible for planning, delivering and otherwise completing the project on their own time.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection for this study was ongoing and involved four cohorts of teacher candidates enrolled in the social studies methods course. Products of learning from the project participants provided the data needed to evaluate the experience. The documents used for analysis included: initial reflection papers, pre/post assessments, video reflections, journals, and final reflection papers. More than 200 documents were analyzed to determine the candidates’ perceptions of service, its impact and significance. Data analysis involved reading, analyzing and synthesizing data across sources to identify patterns and eventually themes. The broad questions used to guide the study yielded sub-categories of data after initial reading of sources (Table 3). The initial reviews determined the breadth of responses across these categories.

Table 3. Categories of Data

Service Learning Awareness
Initial Perception of Project
Concluding Perception of Project
Relevancy between SL and future career

Subsequent readings of the documents were conducted using the benchmarking categories in Table 3 as the coding list. This process allowed the researcher to identify data from the candidates’ responses that formed trends or patterns that were thematically connected.

## Findings

### *Prior Participation*

I have never worked with a service learning project before, nor had I taught a whole class lesson before  
(Candidate A, Cohort 1)

I was not sure what a service learning project was, or what I would be doing, but knew that since it would have to be done for class I might as well try and make the best of it. I had never heard or experienced anything like this so I was wondering what it would be like.  
(Candidate B, Cohort 1)

Overwhelmingly the candidates enrolled in this course during data collection had not participated in service learning projects before. Each semester the average hovered at around 80 percent in terms of not having previous experience with service learning. Of those that had acknowledged participation, the experiences they identified were largely connected to civic or religious organizations in their communities as secondary students. None of the candidates reported having been involved with service learning at the university level.

### *Initial Reaction to Service Learning*

This was going to be a new experience for me. As I skimmed through the book, I felt as though I was going to be learning a lot along with the students. (Cohort 2 Candidate)

I was being forced to participate in something that I really had no idea about, and something I had no choice in being a part of. I did not know what to expect. (Cohort 3 Candidate)

When I found out that we had a pre-arranged service learning project, I must admit that I was not really excited to jump right in. I figured it would be a lot of work, added onto the heavy workload that already comes with this class. To be honest I did not want to do this project or program at all.  
(Cohort 3 Candidate)

After having learned of the service expectation, candidates from each cohort cited nervousness, excitement, and apprehension as their top responses at the outset. Their thoughts of apprehension and nervousness seemed to stem from their concern

over their ability to pull this off as well as the magnitude of the service learning expectation. Their excitement was connected to the reality that they were going to assume the primary responsibility of teaching a unit and not simply assist a teacher or work with a small group of children as they had in previous early field experiences.

*First Teaching Visit*

This was my first time actually ‘teaching.’ I wasn’t sure if I could do it but I still kept a positive attitude. After my first teaching experience, I felt more confident. I know that with each lesson I teach, I will grow more and more.  
(Cohort 2 Candidate)

Candidates were asked to note their expectations after their first day of service with the program. The goal here was to determine if their initial reactions to having to perform this service shifted after actually completing one day of the work. Across cohorts the data show that candidates’ initial thoughts of nervousness or apprehension shifted to feelings of confidence and enjoyment. After completing the first teaching session with their students, candidates realized that the experience was doable as well as a valuable opportunity to learn more about the full responsibility of teaching a room full of children.

Table 4. Initial Reflection Responses

	<b><i>Initial Reaction to SL</i></b>	<b><i>Prior Participation</i></b>	<b><i>Perception after first teaching visit</i></b>
Cohort 1	Excited, nervous, potential learning experience	No (83%)	Excitement, Confidence established
Cohort 2	Excited, Nervous	No (71%)	Enjoyment, Confidence established
Cohort 3	Apprehensive, Reluctant, Overwhelmed, Nervous	No (80 %)	Valuable opportunity, confidence established, excitement
Cohort 4	Nervous, Excited	No (90%)	Excitement, Improved comfort level

### *Remaining Visits*

On my third and fourth visits, I had become very comfortable with the students and I think they had become a lot more comfortable with me as well. I had several students always wanting to erase the board for me or to be my personal assistant for the day. I felt that I was connecting with them on some level, which was great. (Cohort 1 Candidate)

The candidates had a total of 5 teaching visits to make to the school to complete their experience. They were asked to summarize their reactions or perception of the experience across the remaining visits. Cohorts 1 and 3 consistently noted enjoyment and increased comfort levels (with students and curriculum) as their main notion throughout their remaining visits. While Cohorts 2 and 4 leaned toward those as well there also seemed to be an acknowledgement of how important those visits were for getting to know their students on a developmental level. For many of the candidates across cohorts, their field experience prior to this was with one grade level or area of elementary education; upper (3-5) or lower (K-2). With this experience, candidates were typically assigned to the area opposite of their prior experiences or field placements.

### *Service Learning and Their Career*

I now realize the importance of continuously being attentive to my students needs. Many of my students were shy and hesitant to answer questions and participate. I realized how important it is to help students become comfortable enough to engage in activities and answer questions. (Cohort 2 Candidate)

I think there is no better way of learning than to experience the real thing. I think JA helps future teachers to see strengths and weaknesses. I am confident that this experience has laid groundwork for the future. (Cohort 1 Candidate)

In their final reflection papers, participants explicitly addressed how this service experience applied to their career choice - teaching. Cohorts 1 and 4 appeared to see the career value embedded in the opportunities they had to assess the various academic and social needs students have. Cohort 2 acknowledged planning and preparation as the linkages to their chosen profession. After completing a 5 lesson unit on economics, these candidates saw the necessity of planning well, preparing materials, and thinking through management of the learning environment. These elements of planning seemed to be most significant to Cohort 2. Cohort 3 cited a



combination of both learner needs and planning as the cornerstone of this experience as it relates to their field.

### *Concluding Perception of Service Learning*

Service learning projects are extremely important. I feel taking time out of my schedule to assist in my community is a must on an ongoing basis. Whether completing another service learning project or general community service the whole issue is letting people around you know you care and support them in their endeavors. (Cohort 2 Candidate)

It is good to know that what you are doing now may be helping someone have a better life. (Cohort 1 Candidate)

Cohorts were asked to provide their exiting, summarized thoughts regarding service learning as an experience and a teaching tool. With one of the goals of this project including the desire for candidates to consider using service learning in their own classrooms in the future, it was necessary to ascertain what their ending reactions were to this experience as a tool for promoting active citizenship.

All cohorts cited this experience as a 'good experience'. Good experience appeared to refer to the aspect of service. They felt as though dedicating or giving up the time to do something for others was rewarding. This angle is supported by the trend of the data to refer to the experience of 'real world of teaching' separately, which points to the candidates seeing the service piece alone as beneficial.

### **Discussion**

The implications from this study suggest that candidates who complete an organized service learning project: (1) develop positive dispositions toward service learning and see the role of service learning in their future classrooms, (2) develop beginning pedagogical practices of effective teachers, and (3) reinforce their decision to teach.

This service learning experience was prearranged and linked to a course that was graded. In that regard it was a requirement and with that distinction the reaction to a course requirement, no matter its goal, can be mixed at best. While the participants initially expressed frustration, confusion, and resistance to the 'extra assignment' across cohorts, a unanimous concluding result across the data sources and cohorts was the report of value, growth and reward from having completed the experience. The participants' self-observations included personal, professional, and career related significance in the organized service learning experience in the course. Additionally the candidates frequently cited general and specific instances in which they hoped to incorporate service learning oriented activities within their own classrooms. While some

of those candidates expressed concerns over the feasibility to accomplish something of that nature along with other curricular demands, they still expressed a great desire to attempt the integration of service learning.

Analyses of the sources also yielded tremendous amounts of data to support the conclusion that these participants benefited from the opportunity to begin attempting the theories and principles of effective teaching. The participants' responses regarding class-wide procedures, questioning, diverse learning styles, ill-prepared lesson plans, and so forth were rich and voluminous throughout the study. After their initial teaching visit and reflection, the data evidenced the candidates' ability to begin modifying initial generic conceptions of curriculum planning, diversifying materials and methods, and making material culturally relevant for their learners. The participants usually cited the 'reality of teaching' being far different than they expected once they gave pre-assessments, prepared lesson one and taught it. Tasks as simple as preparing for a 45 minute lesson took most of the participants a couple of hours, which was far more time intensive and deliberate than they expected. All of these assertions were woven throughout the participants' various reflections.

Rowls and Swick (2000) conducted an analysis of teacher education syllabi that incorporated service learning and determined several factors that contributed to strengthening the design of courses using this approach. The authors found that one of most critical attributes of meaningful service learning is the reflection process aligned with the experience. The reflection process in this study gave candidates structured, staggered, and deliberate opportunities to consider their experiences as well as room to capture additional personal insights that were significant to them that were not necessarily respective to one of the outlined questions given in advance to guide their thinking.

Perhaps the most positive outcome of this study was a significant pattern which indicated that the participants' decision to teach was reinforced. Participants in this course were of junior classification and in the second semester of methods and foundational coursework. The junior year is typically demanding for elementary teacher candidates in ways they are unfamiliar with in comparison to their first two years of arts and sciences coursework. Students typically arrive back to the department very adept at the reading texts and taking tests mode of instruction. The project/performance based, application driven methods that are typical for teacher education instruction are initially foreign from the experiences they have had during the first two years of college. While they tend to eventually enjoy the switch in teaching style, it does not occur without its share of struggle as they are pulled out of their read-and-take-test mode. What a number of candidates begin to question during their junior year coursework and field based experience is whether teaching is truly the profession they want to pursue. The participants in this study that completed all of the pre/post assessments, lesson planning, teaching, reflection activities and assignments associated with this course had their decision to teach reinforced. Even with the participants' consistent acknowledgement of the prior underestimation of how much work it takes to actually

teach one lesson; they all noted the benefit, reward, and general sense of accomplishment once it was over. The participants' highlighted specific examples of successes with individual or groups of students in their project that made all of the work 'worth it' in their words. The hard work, the time sacrifice, the occasional flop of a lesson did not deter the participants from their decision, in fact it appeared to make the decision more concrete. Malone et. al (2002) examined the impact of a highly-structured, well-integrated service learning tutoring program for undergraduate teacher education majors. The authors found that the participants 'grew in their understanding of and appreciation for the complexity of teaching' and reevaluated their conception of what education means.

In this study the 'real world of teaching' was cited as a critical benefit of this experience as well as across cohorts. Candidates felt as though they were really getting a chance to pull all of the pieces of their various foundations/methods work together for the first time. Along this vein, the data are clear that candidates believe this experience to build the confidence that is needed by showing candidates their strengths and challenges in the teaching process.

Table 5. Final Reflection Responses

	<b><i>Remaining SL visits</i></b>	<b><i>Application of SL to future career</i></b>	<b><i>Perceived value of SL upon completion</i></b>
<b>Cohort 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enjoyed</li> <li>- Increased comfort level</li> <li>- Learned a lot/good experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity to determine student needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduces/prepares candidates for real world</li> <li>- Good preparation for teaching</li> <li>- Important</li> </ul>
<b>Cohort 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Became easier</li> <li>- Gained confidence</li> <li>- Got to know students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Importance of planning clarified</li> <li>- Adequate preparation important</li> <li>- Classroom management significant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very important</li> <li>-Good experience for teachers</li> <li>-Increases teacher confidence</li> <li>- Shows candidates strengths and challenges they possess</li> </ul>
<b>Cohort 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enjoyed</li> <li>- Learned a lot</li> <li>-Increased comfort level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adequate preparation important</li> <li>- Opportunity to determine students' needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good experience &amp; preparation for teaching</li> <li>- Prepares candidates for real world</li> </ul>
<b>Cohort 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enjoyable</li> <li>- Positive</li> <li>- Challenging</li> <li>- Comfort Increased</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunity to see students' needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good experience</li> <li>- More prepared for teaching</li> <li>- More confident</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Initiating a required service learning component in any course requires the professor to be prepared to field concerns, questions, and possibly protests from students. The findings in this study point to the benefits of implementing a service learning component within a course for teacher candidates. The reluctance or resistance can stem from a variety of factors ranging from inexperience with service to a desire to protect one's busy schedule. However even with those factors, it would appear that initial apprehension and inexperience can shift to comfort and high interest over the course of their participation in the service experience.

It may be ascertained that the project's structure (which includes scaffolding by the professor and a community representative) as well as multiple opportunities for reflection throughout the commitment, possibly contribute to the candidates' perceptions

of value at the end of the experience. The findings of this study are clear; when candidates are given opportunities to dedicate themselves to service through organized teaching opportunities the outcomes can be positive.

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