Bringing Civic Engagement to the Head of the Class

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With the focus on test scores and accountability, the issues of student growth, leadership and civic responsibility often are overlooked.   While achievement is important, leadership and responsibility issues are among those most sought by employers. Some of the most recognized studies, such as *A Nation At Risk* support and encourage what are sometimes termed the "soft skills." The Service Learning model, not only encourages the development of the soft skills, it actively engages students the curricular content of the class while using leadership and teaming skills to serve their greater community.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (2002) educators have been focused on achievement and accountability. As a result, teaching at all levels has much more emphasis on the tests. While the efforts toward higher student achievement and accountability are good and deserve recognition, it appears that other issues have been placed on the back burner. Focusing on student growth in terms of leadership, ethics and civic responsibility needs to return to the spotlight.

The issues of shared governance, problem solving and teamwork, ownership of learning, service learning and its core components, reciprocity of benefits, plus alternative licensure and service learning will be addressed in this article.

Shared Governance

Teachers are able to bring stronger student involvement to the classroom level by having students take responsibility for their own learning. The process of students working together to set goals and designing learning activities strongly supports the learning process. Sometimes these efforts are as simple as involving students in establishing classroom rules and procedures. Focusing first on classroom rules and then procedures, students brainstorm a list of rules. Using an Affinity Diagram, the brainstormed ideas can be grouped together establishing a much smaller number of general topics. Any topic that is already a school rule or procedure can be dropped since it already exists, and the activity is specifically for the rules of this classroom. Once the general topics are reduced to a reasonable number, the students with teacher guidance and suggestions can actually write the rules. This becomes the "Constitution of the Classroom" or perhaps a contract between the teacher and students, and between students and students. The process can easily be repeated for classroom procedures. While this activity is not specifically related to the content of the class, it sets the tone and ground rules for the rest of the term/year and better prepares students to start the learning process. Students play a valuable role in this process, experiencing setting parameters for themselves, and therefore, can easily buy into the final product since it is theirs.

Another method of engaging students in the classroom is called "Gives and Gets". This activity, first done individually, asks the students

what they want to "Get" from a project and likewise, what they are willing to "Give" to the success of the project. Once each student has developed a personal set of gives and gets, the class combines all the lists to create and **agree upon** a classroom listing. Student involvement in the total process creates a stronger outcome with built in student acceptance of the work involved. Students will support what they help to create.

Problem Solving and Teamwork

In more advanced situations students engage in learning through problem solving and teamwork activities. Each class uses different projects or activities depending upon the class and subject involved. Regardless of the nature of their involvement, students experience the learning of teamwork, problem solving and ethical practices by participating in activities that reinforce and put a real world focus on the subject being studied. This comes at a time when making learning real and relevant has become more and more important for students and their ultimate success. Teachers of all subjects and at all levels, K-12 and higher education, regularly face the question of "why do we have to learn this?" and "how will I ever use this?" Real and relevant lessons address those pertinent questions.

Ownership in Learning

The Generation Y students that we see today are asking those real and relevant questions even more so than their predecessors. These students who live in a world of instant information not only want to know why, but also they want to know why right now. Further, since so much more information exists than ever before and the information is at their fingertips, many students are not willing to simply accept as fact what a teacher says. They will dig deeper and "check it out" for themselves.

In addition to wanting information, this generation continues to delve deeper into subjects of interest. Their desire for information has led to greater interest in involvement, and to take responsibility for themselves and their communities. Teachers can capitalize on those eager and receptive minds by creating active classrooms, engaging activities, and encouraging students to involve themselves by taking responsibility for their learning.

Service Learning

Good teachers everywhere are searching for engaging opportunities for their students. Unfortunately, the demands of student accountability make these tasks much more difficult to incorporate into the teaching day, often out of perceived necessity. While experienced teachers are able to engage their students in meaningful ways while still focusing on their curriculum, it is a challenge for newer teachers. Establishing engagement admittedly takes time, but the end result is so much more valuable to the student. As long as the engagement activities bring the student back to the content of the class, the time spent on engagement is certainly "worth-it" when considering student success. We believe the best way of engaging students in civic and ethical activities that reinforce the curriculum is through Service Learning opportunities.

Service-learning is a teaching and learning strategy that promotes connections in academic learning, instruction and reflection with meaningful community service. Connections are made with community partners who have a need that directly relates to the learning objectives in the classroom. Through the partnership, both the student and the community partner are engaged to work together to create experiences that will enhance learning and strengthen communities.

Core Concepts of Service Learning

One of the core concepts which encompasses service-learning is connecting academic content and standards to active participation in service

oriented activities. Within any given academic area, students are often led deeper into theory without participating in a real-life situation in which they are able to put the knowledge into practice. Participation in service learning as an instructional strategy creates that connection and offers the community solutions to often un-met needs.

A second core concept is to provide a venue for students to use skills and knowledge gained within the classroom in real-life situations; thus, making that vital link between knowledge and applicability. This link is enhanced by the mentorship of both a community partner and the Instructor. Therefore, the student is able to see the connections between learning and application of that learning, and they are able to see how their application has worked within the service-learning activity.

In addition to connecting academic content to service oriented experiences, the service learning experience fosters a sense of awareness of needs within a given community. When a student becomes aware of the needs within a community, there is often a sense of responsibility in acknowledging the needs, and then becoming proactive in meeting those needs. Therefore, a meaningful partnership is cultivated.

One activity that can aid in this process is called Exploding the Issue (developed by the Oasis Center, 2008). This is a brainstorming process in which the students are asked to think about the deeper issues within their communities.

1. Identify the BIG ISSUE within a community to be addressed.
2. Brainstorm on all the reasons why it is a problem or how this problem might impact the community or individuals (IMPACTS).
3. Identify the causes of this particular problem (CAUSES).
4. Identify the root causes of this problem (ROOT CAUSES).

5. In order to create a meaningful project, address one of the root causes rather than the issue or impact (ACTION).

Students are then able to have a part in creating a worthwhile project while connecting the service to the learning.

The service learning project results in higher order thinking or *synthesis* as the culminating piece relies on reflection. Structured reflection is used to refer to a thoughtfully constructed process that challenges and guides the activity and the students in constructing meaningful experiences. Students are asked to reflect on the activity throughout the process and see how change has or has not occurred as a result of their actions. In reflection, the student cognitively sorts through the following process:

1. What is the knowledge or theory behind the content I am learning;
2. How does this relate to X issue within our world, our nation, our state and within our community;
3. What can be done to address this piece of the issue right here and right now;
4. What is my responsibility in addressing the issue;
5. How did my actions affect change and what is next?

This process of continued reflection allows the students, the Instructor and the Community Partner to make that transition from theory to action. Reflections can be done through journal entries, reflection essays, portfolios, blogs, grant proposals, press releases, drafting of policy briefs or legislation, published articles, or agency training manuals, oral exercises or even in projects or activities, to name just a few. One of our university students, an alternative licensed teacher, suggested that she will have her high school students create a web page for any service learning projects her class does. The page will outline the project highlighting the learning for

the high school students; showcase the reflections of the student participants as well as the recipients of the service; and document the celebration at the project's conclusion.

Reciprocity of Benefits

The benefits of a community based service learning experience are multi-faceted and reciprocal in nature for both the community partner and the students. One benefit is the student is able see him/herself as a change-agent or as someone who can make a difference. The very act of civic engagement boasts confidence of utilizing skills and knowledge to affect change.

Another benefit relates to the social and emotional learning and development, both of which are often hard to conceptualize within the academic setting. Connecting civic engagement and content objectives serves to heighten the social and emotional learning experience. This link between the emotional aspects of learning and the impact on change within civic engagement is likely to help change values as well as ideas and, therefore, supports social, emotional, and cognitive learning and development.

There are numerous studies that confirm the ability of service learning to strengthen citizenship development and link engagement through service learning to civic outcomes (Carnegie, 2003; Melchior, 1999; Yates & Youniss, 1998). These studies confirm that well designed service learning objectives help to increase several student capabilities, including retention, knowledge and skills. Higher order thinking skills, analysis, and understanding complex issues, civic responsibility, citizenship, commitment to service are enhanced. Career awareness of options, clarity of choice and technical skills, plus personal outcomes related to self-esteem, empowerment, and social outcomes related to pro-social behaviors and reduction of risky behaviors are honed.

Alternative Licensure and Service Learning

We believe in civic responsibility and ethical engagement so much that we have incorporated Service Learning into the seminars we teach for alternative licensed teachers. These teachers, most of whom come from Generations X and Y have demonstrated capability in their content areas, are searching for methods to deliver that content in a meaningful and powerful way. The seminars were established to offer the new teachers support, practical applications for the classroom and positive group engagement using mentoring techniques modeled as a basis for the activities.

The seminar includes what has been dubbed, Service Learning 101. This engaged presentation shows all the components of strong Service Learning, and has the teachers consider and engage in activities to develop, carry out and reflect on the process. They see how Service Learning has students take responsibility for their own learning and become a part of the decision making process for that learning. It teaches social responsibility and ethical behavior in real and relevant situations that the students identify themselves and accept as their own. Teachers can piggy back on the activities, often during the reflection process, to relate the activities and the associated learning with larger and more expansive situations, making the engagement even more real. Service Learning 101 has become a link between a university class for teacher licensure and the K-12 classroom.

In addition to the individual Service Learning activities, we offer our university students an opportunity to transform their K-12 classrooms into learning laboratories by creating hands-on activities as the basis of their instruction. The laboratories using Service Learning, create involvement between the school and community in a positive and responsible manner. Finally, the laboratories focus on the "hands-on method" of

teaching and learning. It creates opportunities for practical application instruction that makes the curriculum as well as the social and civic engagement relevant to the students. Additionally the experiences reaffirm the content in a positive and productive manner which, surprisingly enough, also supports the test.

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