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The True Impact of Service Learning

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Abstract

Connections are made between the ideas and data presented in two articles to personal experiences: *Imagining a Better World: Service-Learning as a Benefit to Teacher Education* and the 2012 study from the University of Kentucky, which looks at the impact of service-learning in practice. *Imagining a Better World: Service-learning as a Benefit to Teacher Education* defines service-learning as “An ‘approach to teaching and learning in which service and learning are blended in a way that both occur and are enriched by the other’” (Jagla et al, 2010 p.3) This blending of service and learning is exemplified in a medical mission trip to El Salvador. The author demonstrates, from firsthand experience, how much of an influence service-learning can have on the lives and personal world view of high school student and teachers. This experience supports the data presented from the University of Kentucky which is to say that service-learning not only creates empathetic students who understand their impact as agents of change but also increase test scores. This article overall presents the benefits of service-learning and how implementing service-learning in teacher training programs can have a positive impact on student outcomes.

Keywords: service-learning, education

As a high school Special Education teacher I had the privilege of accompanying two students on a medical mission to El Salvador through a partnership between my high school and Medical Wings International (MWI). Medical Wings sends doctors and other medical professionals to areas of the world that would not typically have medical care readily available. This global partnership began because doctors experienced language barriers while abroad.

The president of MWI was familiar with the health sciences focus of my school and knew about our predominantly bilingual student body. The president of MWI determined that creating a service-learning focused student group would benefit both her organization and the students involved. About two years ago the president of Medical Wings and our Dean of Student Life launched the student group *Teens on Wings*. The student group organizes local

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events and fundraisers and sends student on international medical missions. Students who attend the missions are determined by an application process, which includes an essay and grade eligibility. Essays written by two students with whom I traveled conveyed a fervor and passion for learning about the medical field through a medical mission. It was this excitement that peaked my interest in the Teens on Wings organization.

I first became interested in Teens on Wings after the group presented at a professional development session for our staff. The students spoke with such passion and true enthusiasm about what they had learned that I couldn't help but be interested in learning more about the organization. I wanted to see what this experience had taught them. I made the connections I needed to in order to be involved in the next mission, which was to El Salvador. The mission to El Salvador was based on a high need for medical intervention and a strong relationship between the mayor of the host village and MWI.

I quickly became involved in preparing for the trip by organizing materials, getting the students prepared for the mission, meeting parents, fundraising, among other things. One of the students who attended the El Salvador mission is the president of the Teens on Wings group. He had already been on a mission to Columbia so he was certainly more knowledgeable than I. He helped to calm some of my nerves about my first mission and really reminded me why all the leg work ahead of the travel was so important.

We made our way to El Salvador at 4 in the morning. On our flight we talked about expectations for the mission and what we thought we would experience. One of my students stated that she expected to see some sad things and be really tired. In learning about the area we were traveling to and medical missions she knew that we were going to be seeing poverty and working intently supporting the doctors on the mission. After two flights and a three-hour bus ride up the mountains we were in the village of Ataco, ready to set up the clinic in the town hall. This was the first time I saw the flexibility and maturity of my students. The adults complained more about setting up the clinic than my two students. They didn't wait to be told what to do they went looking for tasks and completed them. If they weren't sure about something, they didn't hesitate to ask for help or an explanation. That night we had pupusas, a local favorite food of tortilla dough filled with meat and cheese with the mayor of Ataco. The students impressed me with the amount of candor they had in speaking about what brought them to Ataco. This meal was pivotal in truly becoming local members of Ataco. We were able to see how building relationships with influential members of a community can create lasting influence. This year was the 11th in which the Medical Wings organization had a mission located in Ataco. It also allowed my students to gain a level of comfort in their Spanish language ability and convey their knowledge of local customs.

The next day began early with the news that the clinic would only be spending that day in the town hall. The following two days of the mission were to be spent up in the mountain in smaller farming villages. This meant taking us away from the electricity and cover of the building and out into the open. We spent the day doing what we could to see as many community members as possible. I spent the day greeting patients and getting basic medical information (weight, temperature, and blood pressure). My students worked as translators with the doctors, they spent the day gathering and relaying medical information. Throughout this process they had to learn medical vocabulary and help ensure that all community members well informed about their treatments.

In working so closely with the doctors my students were able to see how close the

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community is and how truly grateful these people were for our help. The first day went fast and before I could really take in what was happening the day was done. I was impressed with the level of confidence both students showed in interacting with patients. The students not only took medical information, they got to know the community and learn from each person. They not only helped patients but they also built relationships with the members of the town hall that helped us in the clinic. They made themselves members of the community we were serving and used that trust to help provide the best medical care possible. They did everything they could to learn from the experience and it was only day one.

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Day two and three were spent in two separate small villages in the mountains near Ataco. The students grew in confidence by seeing how their knowledge of language and a new area of the world influenced their conversations. One evening a student shared that she learned about the impact she can have. She knew that she helped the kids in the clinic but she now realized how each interaction impacted a family which in turn impacted the community as a whole. The other student, who had been on a mission previously, reiterated his peer's sentiment of how large of an impact we had. He felt that in the previous mission they had stayed in one location and made a difference in that place. In Ataco we got to make a difference in a number of villages. This was a moment of transformation for me.

In my teaching I strive to teach students the impact of their voice. I want my students to leave my class knowing that they are agents of change in their lives and the lives of those around them. This moment of transformation was how this experience gave these students that sense of impact. This medical mission had taught these two students in four days what I strived to achieve in a year of teaching. These students know that they can and will impact the world around them. They can now go back and talk share their peers the extent to which this experience enabled them to have an impact and simultaneously be impacted.

While I was processing this experience, I considered the action research project and accompanying paper I had completed at the end of the most recent semester at National Louis University. The role of education is changing and in order to create global citizens we need to adjust how we are teaching our students. My mission trip to El Salvador solidified this thought for me and provided the context of service-learning as a place to implement change. The aim of education is to create critical thinkers who are able to learn, process information, problem solve with that information and create solutions.

American education tends to focus on individual achievement and success. In an ever more global society I can see how service-learning can impact teaching and learning. We are so connected to others all over our world that education must evolve to create global citizens. I am not suggesting that all students need to experience international service-learning. This impact can and should be felt within a student's own community. The most effective and logical and effective place to begin this transition to service-learning is within teacher education programs. Here teachers can and should experience service-learning, which can help them feel and understand the impact of service-learning. Teacher training programs need to design and implement pedagogical practices that convey the impact of service-learning and how to implement effective service-learning in order for it to become common

place within our education system.

In her article *Imagining a Better World: Service-learning as a Benefit to Teacher Education*, Jagla reinforces how other teachers have seen this impact when they implemented service-learning experiences. One quote connected directly with my own view of service-learning and education: “Dewey insisted that we learn essentially by and from experience and that education should meet the public needs and be responsive to the condition of modern life” (Jagla et al, 2010, p. 1). My own philosophy of education is articulated here and throughout “*Imagining a Better World*”. The definition of service-learning proposed in this article is one that encompasses many of my personal ideas:

An ‘approach to teaching and learning in which service and learning are blended in a way that both occur and are enriched by the other’ (Anderson et al, 2001, p. xi). Service-learning, to us, is what Arendt (1998, 2005) calls vitae activa and praxis—the highest form of human activity; an expression of the condition of plurality, our collective social and political engagement; and an embodiment of critical democratic aspirations and practices. (Jagla et al, 2010, p.3)

Innate to this pedagogy is that we have responsibilities for and with others. This is connected to my classroom goal of students sensing the impact of their voice. If a student goes through their formative years without seeing how they can influence others and have a responsibility to do so positively, then our education system is not completing what it sets out to achieve. At its core, service-learning aims to create this impact. For this experience in El Salvador the curricular connection came from a number of subjects. Our students were about to apply content that they learned from their health sciences courses. Their Medical Interventions course touches on how disease are spread and ways to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses. The students were able to discuss with families of patients why all members of the family needed to treat for scabies.

Upon their return, our students were able to discuss how an entire village could have worms because of poor sanitation. The students were able to use their not only their native Spanish skill but their content knowledge by using proper medical terms. They were also able to take new terms and phrases back with them to their Spanish classes. Students had a basic knowledge of the history of El Salvador and its political system so that they were able to understand the role of the mayor of Ataco. These curricular connections added to the personal learning of my students. Both students on this mission and all student involved in Medical Wings must maintain a 3.0 GPA, which incentivizes students to focus academically in order to participate. One student participant graduated was able to write from real experience why he wanted to pursue a medical career path when applying to college.

Service-learning sets out to make connections for students for the purposes of understanding their impact and their responsibility to world around them. “*Imagining a Better World*” uses Bourdieu and Polkinghorne’s (2004) concept of habitus. Habitus is the connections and relationships an individual builds. “Practices are consequences of interactions between an individual’s historically developed dispositions (habitus) and a specific field of contention.” (Jagla et al, 2010, p.6) Service-learning creates habitus connections and should be an important part of the American education system. “Service-learning involves an important ethical component that transcends the limitations of specific circumstances of the recipients of service and those who provide it” (Jagla et al, p. 8). In El Salvador I saw my students’ learning go deeper than surface level knowledge. They connected with the community we were serving. It went beyond just serving the community; we became members of the community and helped it grow.

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Working with students who have diverse learning needs has allowed me to see the need for empathy and understanding from educators. Implementing and participating in service-learning allows educators to develop a higher level of empathy. In El Salvador students demonstrated empathy for the community we were serving while still empowering them. During this mission my students were empowered by seeing how their actions and work had a great impact on those around them. They weren't told what to do that had to determine what was needed and complete it. This experience allowed them to look outside of themselves and their immediate wants for the benefit of another. "Service-learning...may be the only means of developing the teacher candidate who is empathetic and engaged in the ethics of learning." (Jagla et al, p.8) All teacher preparation programs should strive to develop an empathetic teacher. One of the more frustrating aspects of my role as a special education teacher is when teachers don't show students empathy. I have become an advocate for students and I know that the students I accompanied on this medical mission have developed a level of understanding and empathy that will increase their personal success.

My experience in El Salvador allowed me to learn from my students and see the impact that true service can have on their learning. I saw my students grow and develop skills most high school students do not have. They have seen their personal impact and how they can generate change in their own lives and in the community. As we were leaving El Salvador the mayor stepped onto our bus and thanked us all again and then said "As you head home do so safely and remember you always have a second home here in Ataco" Our experience created a home, a community in which we are influencing members. We all walked away knowing that the service we were able to provide has created a learning experience that we will remember for years to come. My experience in El Salvador and subsequent research has fortified my resolve to promote service-learning as a norm in all schools. As the landscape of education is changing so should our approach and service-learning is one important pedagogical tool that schools should use.

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