



TALK IT UP

ADVOCATING FOR SERVICE-LEARNING

EDITION ONE

Helping our members make powerful allies for service-learning is one of the founding purposes of the National Service-Learning Partnership. This *Talk It Up* is the first in a year-long series to help members advocate more effectively on behalf of service-learning. Many of you tell us that you don't think of yourselves as advocates. Yet, you recognize the need for the support and resources that advocacy can secure. Each month in *Talk It Up*, one of our members, or a guest writer, will offer suggestions about advocating persuasively for service-learning. These writers are service-learning leaders—young people, educators, community leaders, parents, and researchers—who can share information and advice. Taken together, they will provide a 360-degree review of the many issues at stake in promoting service-learning.

Anthony Welch, Chair, National Service-Learning Partnership Board of Directors

THE TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON ADOPTING SERVICE-LEARNING

By James Toole

A group of middle school students and teachers attending a conference in a southern state were introduced to service-learning for the first time. In the middle of the opening workshop, a sixth-grade boy turned to his teacher and said, "Ms. Murphy? You're taking notes on this, aren't you? This is good stuff. You need to be writing this down!"

Fortunately, these teachers had experienced the same epiphany about the value of service-learning and also regarded it as "good stuff." For them, service-learning appeared almost akin to natural law—the innate instructional order of the universe. But that is not the case for all teachers. While many schools offer *some* service-learning, only 6.6% of American teachers cumulatively use the practice in their classrooms (United States Department of Education, 1999). The nagging questions facing service-learning advocates remain: Why do some teachers use service-learning and some do not? And, if we knew the answer to that question, what could we do about it?

BELIEFS ABOUT GOOD TEACHING MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

In the late 1990s, I conducted a three-year study, sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, of seven National Youth Leadership Council K-8 Generator Schools. I found that 50% of the teachers in these schools used service-learning and 50% did not. The teachers who used service-learning were distributed unevenly among the seven schools. Site variations in school politics, structural conditions, resources, district policy, professional development, state standards, and leadership made a difference. Despite important school-level differences, however, most of the variation in teacher use occurred *within* each school. Even in schools with strong service-learning practice, many teachers did not use this approach.

What was the difference between individual teachers who used service-learning pedagogy and those who did not? There was no distinction in terms of age, teaching

experience, years at their current school, commitment to teaching, or gender. I found excellent beginning teachers *and* excellent veteran teachers using service-learning. Although users did have a slightly higher level of education after college, the distinguishing factor in participation was teachers' beliefs about what constituted good teaching.

Teachers who used service-learning felt differently about how young people learn, the proper instructional relationship of teachers and students, the importance of connecting the classroom to the outside world, and students' ability to self-direct their own learning. These beliefs affected teachers' propensity to use not only service-learning but also a whole host of instructional practices. Service-learning teachers were significantly more likely

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than nonusers to have students work in cooperative groups, assess their own work, use the internet, participate in a project requiring data collection, use primary resources, and go into the community to learn.

HELPING "CONFLICTED USERS" BECOME CHAMPIONS

Every school had a small group of service-learning champions as well as a small group of educators not interested in service-learning. The majority of the faculty members, however, were on a continuum between supporters and opponents. This meant that many teachers were conflicted about service-learning: they were conflicted users (using service-learning but having trouble reconciling it with their beliefs about teaching) or conflicted nonusers (not using service-learning but literally feeling guilty about it).

How can advocates help "conflicted" teachers become dedicated service-learning users? This task is not easy. Existing educational policy and professional development too often look for "quick fixes." Policymakers and administrators act as if their assignment is to dispense answers, not to provoke thought, ask questions, and generate dis-

ussion. Professional development likewise is too often superficial and episodic.

If the crucial difference in whether teachers adopt service-learning lies in their beliefs about teaching, then real change will occur only when educational policies, professional development, and school culture are all constructed in a manner that supports educators' grappling with the best knowledge about how young people learn. Here are three ways advocates can make a difference:

1 Apply what we know about effective classroom instruction to teacher professional development.

Service-learning teachers know that modeling shared ownership of the learning process, creating a community of

learners, and fostering open inquiry and real-life problem-solving propel their students' work forward. We need to apply these insights to adult learners as well. Perhaps most promising is the growing emphasis on in-depth, job-embedded professional development like learning

communities and study groups to explore an innovation like service-learning. These approaches are powerful because they create a *culture* of continual learning and deep reflection. This is especially important, given my finding that teachers using service-learning were much more likely to be involved in virtually every type of professional development activity than were teachers not using this pedagogy.

2 Educate policymakers about how students learn most effectively.

Policymakers include anyone in your community who plays a role in setting instructional goals for schools—from the district curriculum director, to the school board chair, to your member of Congress. Advocates must talk about service-learning in terms of the successful learning environment it creates. Most policymakers need better information about the latest research on learning. They also need examples of how the instructional practices that support service-learning reflect this research and can become a core part of the school environment. There is no better way for them to learn this than through visiting classrooms that model good service-learning practice.

3 Focus on “conflicted” educators, not diehard opponents. Real change in instructional beliefs can take hold only if the whole school is involved. But change has to have a starting point. Advocates should begin with those educators who need reinforcement in their current service-learning practice or those educators whose beliefs will allow them to take a leap with some support. As long as service-learning teachers live on “different instructional planets” from their colleagues, service-learning’s growth will depend upon a few weary champions. Advocates need to find better ways to build bridges between their own beliefs and those of the educators and policymakers they are trying to persuade about the efficacy of service-learning. This will require patience, listening, and respect for other “journeys.”

Peter Senge and his colleagues caution: “If there aren’t fundamental shifts in how people think and interact, as well as in how they explore new ideas, then all the reorganizing, fads, and strategies in the world won’t add up to much.” Making service-learning come alive in the classroom takes not only skills, but a “fundamental shift” in attitude about the potential of young people and the nature of education. For this to happen, advocates must apply what they know about what works best for student learning to how they make the case for service-learning with policymakers, administrators, and their colleagues.

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL SERVICE-LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

The National Service-Learning Partnership (www.servicelearningpartnership.org) is a national leadership organization that is committed to advancing service-learning as a core element of the educational experience for every elementary, middle, and secondary school student in the United States. Founded in 2001, the Partnership works with its 2,500 individual and organizational members—young people, educators, and community leaders—to educate, organize, and mobilize service-learning supporters around a strategic agenda for promoting and improving service-learning practice. The Partnership is based at the Academy for Educational Development (www.aed.org) in New York City.

CITATIONS

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