

Review Article

Can Service-Learning Benefit Students and Community Members? A Review of Research

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Service-learning projects can benefit students and community members. Instructors can include these projects across all subjects and with students at any grade level so that pupils apply what they learn in class to the real world. However, poorly implemented service-learning can harm students and community members. Without a checklist, standards, and other guidelines for quality practice, teachers might implement service-learning that does not lead to favorable outcomes. This critical review documents how service-learning can impact the students and communities where it is implemented. It presents the findings from an analysis of literature from various sources on this approach to teaching. It also includes a checklist that can guide educators to develop effective service-learning projects and standards for quality practice to help them avoid implementing ineffective projects.

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1. Introduction

Service-learning projects can benefit students and community members in many ways. For example, implementing service-learning designed to promote interaction between students and elderly people can benefit older people by improving their well-being. Older people usually experience physical problems and a decline in social and affective relationships, which impair their quality of life. But students who have the skills to improve older people's well-being can bring joy to their lives by interacting with them ^[1].

In addition to helping the elderly, service-learning can reduce the age discrimination that young people sometimes express toward older people. Such negative feelings may occur because of a lack of favorable contact with older adults. Although service-learning designed to enhance the well-being of older people may reduce their loneliness, it can also benefit the students who participate. In addition to making them feel they are addressing a real-world problem, this kind of service helps students better understand the elderly and themselves. Creating chances for students to have intergenerational experiences helps dispel myths they may have about older people and allows them to learn about age diversity ^[2]. One reason service-learning can be beneficial is that it can help students see how what they learn in class can be used to make a difference in the world ^[3]. For instance, students preparing to become social studies teachers frequently read about service-learning in their course textbooks. However, without doing a project designed to fulfill the goals of service-learning, they would likely have a harder time appreciating the value of this approach. Service-learning is a valuable approach also because it can be used across all subjects and with students at any grade level. It can be implemented with a single student, all the students in a class, or several students in a small group ^[4]. Service-learning is a type of experiential learning that focuses on creating opportunities for students to have experiences in a real-world environment. One of the ideas this approach is based on is that students learn from these experiences through critical reflection. Experiential learning as a method of teaching was developed to a great extent by John Dewey. Dewey believed that reflection is a crucial component of experiential learning. Reflection occurs when students look back on their experiences and consider their implications ^[5]. Dewey emphasized providing students with learning activities based on practical experiences. He also believed in creating opportunities for them to solve problems rather than having them absorb knowledge passively ^[6]. David Kolb also contributed to the field of experiential learning. Kolb believed that effective experiential learning is comprised of four phases. The first two phases involve the need for students to have concrete experiences and to reflect on these experiences. The next two phases include forming generalizations from observations and testing the generalizations in new situations ^[5]. In implementing service-learning, educators need to be aware that this approach to learning differs from ordinary volunteer work. Volunteer work places a greater value on communities in need. In contrast, service-learning focuses more on the personal and academic development of the people providing the community service ^[6]. When implemented well, service-learning can help students develop specific and generic competencies as they provide community service ^[2]. One advantage of this approach is that it allows students to apply curriculum content to the real world ^[1]. The National Council for the Social

Studies (NCSS) ^[7] indicated that educational institutions need to provide students with opportunities to link classroom instruction with aspects of democratic life through community problem-solving. The NCSS also considers service-learning as a component of effective civic learning implementation and urges educational institutions to help students gain firsthand knowledge of concepts such as the common good as they develop compassion and empathy for others. Participating in well-designed service-learning projects can benefit students because it encourages them to see themselves as capable of causing change that contributes to a better world. Service-learning can also help students develop socially and academically. This learning approach promotes social development because it increases opportunities for students to work with others. And it promotes academic development by allowing more chances for pupils to think critically and increase their knowledge of a subject area ^[8].

2. Theoretical Framework

Interest theory provided the lens for interpreting the literature collected for this critical review on service-learning. This theory is based on the idea that to develop academic interest, students need to find meaning in their coursework. Service-learning can help students apply their coursework to the real world. Thus, this theory can explain why students might benefit from service-learning. When students believe their coursework is valuable, they tend to perform better academically. This outcome occurs because perceiving that their courses are relevant and useful contributes to harder work and better performance ^[9].

Students frequently experience different kinds of interest. Situational interest occurs when something captures a student's attention at a particular time, leading the student to pay more attention. In contrast, individual interest involves the stable preferences students have. This kind of interest is less dependent on situational circumstances.

Since interest is strongly associated with academic success, educators who apply interest theory to encourage desirable outcomes often use interventions to create the kind of learning environment that motivates students. Harackiewicz et al. ^[9] offered two approaches to create this kind of environment:

1. Promoting situational interest by creating an environment that will stimulate and engage all students.
2. Focusing on activities that allow students to connect academic work with individual interests.

3. Method of Research

To analyze the literature and to report the findings for this review, the guidelines for conducting a critical review were followed. A critical review is a type of narrative review. Although narrative reviews are generally regarded as non-systematic, they can be very useful because, unlike systematic reviews, they allow researchers to address broader research questions and use a wide variety of studies ^[10]. Narrative reviews are useful when information is needed from a collection of findings that result from the use of diverse methodologies or from research that explores different relationships or theories ^[11]. One of the differences between systematic reviews and narrative reviews is that narrative reviews are often conducted using qualitative methods. In contrast, systematic reviews are typically analyzed using a quantitative approach ^[12]. Critical reviews include an interpretative lens that can come from a theory or a critical perspective ^[10]. High-quality critical reviews offer an analysis of literature from diverse sources ^[13]. The process for completing this kind of review involves conducting a non-comprehensive search of the literature and identifying dominant themes that address the research questions ^[10].

3.1. Research Questions

The research process for this review started by formulating two broad research questions focusing on what educators need to know about service-learning to use this approach to produce desirable outcomes:

1. Does service-learning benefit or harm students and community members?
2. What can instructors do to increase the chances that service-learning leads to desirable outcomes?

3.2. Criteria for Inclusion

The literature analyzed for this review was retrieved using the Google Scholar database, the Google search engine, and the databases available at the University of Southern Mississippi.

After a search was conducted to find studies, articles, websites, and content from other sources that could provide information to answer the research questions, this literature was checked for authenticity. Authenticity involves determining whether the information a source provides is genuine ^[14]. Content produced by reputable organizations, journals, researchers, and authors was included. When enough information was gathered to develop themes that addressed the research questions, new content was no longer needed. This approach of determining sample size is based on the concept of using “information power” to decide how large a sample needs to be. Researchers who use this approach believe that when a

sample contains abundant information, fewer sources can be used ^[15]. The analysis process started as soon as the first source was selected. Qualitative researchers frequently use an iterative process in which the findings inform the researcher whether more data need to be collected and interpreted ^[16].

3.3. Thematic Analysis

The literature selected for analysis was coded to develop themes. Codes are descriptive labels that researchers assign to data, and themes are common patterns in the data ^[17]. The guidelines for conducting a thematic analysis provided by Braun and Clarke ^[18] were followed. These guidelines consist of six steps: familiarization with the data, application of codes to the data, identification of themes, review of themes, refinement of themes, and preparation of a report.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis process led to the identification of three themes. Two of these themes address the first research question, and one theme addresses the second research question. Although the literature on service-learning indicates that this approach has benefitted students and community members, it also points out that service-learning has the potential to harm both students and community members. Additionally, the literature indicates the steps that educators can take to ensure that service-learning leads to desirable outcomes.

4.1. Theme 1: Benefiting Students and Community Members

The studies that have been conducted on service-learning reveal that this approach can lead to many desirable outcomes. For example, Aláez et al. ^[2] reported that their systematic review of 28 research papers on service-learning with the elderly showed that student engagement with older people benefitted both students and the elderly. Students acquired a more accurate understanding of the elderly. And the relationships they developed with older people alleviated the feelings of social isolation that the elderly frequently experience. Burch et al. ^[19] conducted a meta-analysis focusing on experiential learning and analyzed 89 studies, many of which involved service-learning. These studies included both a control and a treatment group. They concluded that when experiential pedagogies are implemented, students experience superior learning outcomes. In the concluding section of their study, they indicated that they could not find a single context across the studies they analyzed that suggested experiential learning did not have a favorable impact on learning. Salam et al. ^[20] conducted a systematic literature

review on service-learning at institutions of higher education and found that research on this topic has shown that it benefits students, faculty members, and community members. Students gained vital skills, such as communication and critical-thinking skills. Faculty members benefited because service-learning allowed them to implement action research, which tests existing theories in a real-world environment. It also permitted them to improve their approaches to teaching. Community members benefited in different ways that depended on the kind of service that was provided. For instance, offering psychological support to at risk-students encouraged them to continue their education.

Earlier research also revealed that service-learning is beneficial. For example, an evaluation of the national Learn and Serve America program showed that this program had a favorable effect on students' educational development and civic attitudes. The program was found to improve students' school performance and educational attitudes [21]. Another early study concluded that students who did not participate in service-learning had less concern for others' social welfare, but those who participated maintained those concerns. The participants also had better attitudes toward schoolwork [22].

4.2. Theme 2: Harming Students and Community Members

Although many studies have shown that service-learning is beneficial, the literature on this approach also indicates that it can cause harm. For students to benefit from service-learning, educators must implement it well. Sadly, *some educators have misunderstandings about service-learning that can lead to poor implementation. Ngai et al. [23] concluded that a significant proportion of the teachers in their study had misconceptions about this approach. These misconceptions involve conflating voluntary work with service-learning and placing more importance on students' learning in comparison with the community's needs. Another finding from this study was that a considerable percentage of the participants were unaware of the harm poorly implemented service-learning may cause. Educators need to be aware of the harm that poorly implemented service-learning can cause because the consequences of poor implementation are serious. Meuers [24] documented the many ways that poorly planned service-learning can harm students, starting with the academic impact of such programs. Although service-learning has the potential to enhance academic concepts, participating in low-quality programs can lead students to complain that their service interferes with their understanding of academic content rather than enhancing it. Poorly implemented programs can also discourage students from participating in civic engagement in the future. This outcome can occur if they perceive service-learning as a requirement instead of an opportunity. To prevent this outcome, educators need to design programs that help students feel that their service is*

meaningful and provide ways for them to see its effects. When planning service-learning, educators need to remember that although negative experiences can affect students' willingness to participate in civic activities in the future, high-quality service-learning usually encourages students to take part in these activities later on. Unfortunately, some educational institutions do not implement service-learning well, leading students to feel that it is a pointless requirement [25].

There was even a case involving students who sued their school district because they were dissatisfied with having to participate as volunteers. This case involved two students in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. These students contested a requirement demanding them to partake in unpaid community service during non-school hours [25]. Although their lawsuits failed, the case shows how students may perceive community service as an unnecessary requirement rather than a chance to make a contribution that leads to a better world. In addition to leading to student dissatisfaction, poorly implemented service-learning can contribute to stereotypical attitudes rather than dispel myths about community members. Without adequate reflection, preparation, and community partnership, students may end up feeling like they participated in a program that focuses on saving unfortunate people. They may develop a "savior complex," viewing themselves as rescuers of less fortunate populations rather than collaborative partners in community development [24].

Poorly implemented service-learning can be harmful not just to those providing the service but to the recipients as well. Eby [26] documented how this can happen when students interact with young children from low-income families during short-term service-learning projects that students complete for college courses. Short-term projects are often implemented out of necessity because professors need to schedule them according to their institution's calendar. Since professors regularly get new students for each course, the relationships students develop with community members often end up being broken at the end of the service-learning projects. This outcome can be painful to children in low-income areas and can increase the unstable conditions they too frequently experience.

The problems associated with short-term service-learning projects can be alleviated through several strategies. One of these is to create year-long service-learning courses. In such courses, students can be trained in the fall as direct service continues during the entire year. If students cannot commit to year-long classes, faculty members can make arrangements so that members of the community receive about the same number of students each semester [27].

In addition to the possibility of harming the members receiving the service, poorly implemented service-learning can strain relationships with community organizations. Instead of benefitting from service-learning, communities functioning with limited resources must spend more energy and time dealing with unprepared volunteers. Treating community organizations as convenient placement sites rather than genuine partners can not only damage relationships but also cause these organizations to become reluctant to participate in future service-learning initiatives.

4.3. Theme 3: Using the Right Guidelines to Implement Service-Learning

Although poor implementation of service-learning can contribute to various kinds of harm, educators can take precautions to ensure that this approach leads to desirable outcomes. To achieve this goal, they can use several strategies. One of these is to use a checklist outlining the key stages of service-learning. Various researchers have created such a checklist. For example, Jones and Lake ^[4] included one with six stages: 1. investigation, 2. preparation, 3. action, 4. reflection, 5. demonstration, and 6. evaluation. Teachers can start the investigation stage by having discussions with students about a problem and then having them talk about how it affects the needs of the community. The problem can be included in the school curriculum, and it can also be a problem that emerges out of students' interests or observations.

In the preparation phase, teachers decide with students how long the project will last. This phase also requires identifying the skills students need to have and ensuring that they match academic objectives. Collaboration with community members is also part of this phase because effective service-learning cannot be created without a strong understanding of the community's needs.

The next phase begins when students start taking action designed to benefit the community. The action phase of a project that Jones and Lake ^[4] described began when children created recycling boxes for a paper recycling project. After creating the boxes, the children gave them to other classes at their school. Some of the academic goals of the project included developing the understanding that natural resources are limited, and that action can be taken to reduce their consumption. As noted earlier, reflection is a crucial component of experiential learning. In this stage, students communicate feelings, and teachers enhance students' understanding of their experiences. For the paper recycling project, the teacher helped develop children's understanding by asking questions involving the reasons recycling is important and the feelings that other classes had about recycling. Students also reflected by writing about this project in their journals. Their written and oral responses implied that they developed knowledge about the value of recycling paper ^[4]. The demonstration phase allows students to share their experience with others.

They can share them with other students, teachers, or community members. A group of fourth- and fifth-graders in a Texas school district, for example, created learning centers at a nearby zoo to show what they learned from their service-learning project on enhancing the environment. Their project included planting trees, providing habitat for wildlife, and supplying shade for people. The learning centers consisted of hands-on activities that the children created to teach visitors at the zoo [28]. Finally, during the evaluation stage, teachers assess the overall project. They evaluate whether students learned the desired content and whether any aspects need improvement. Equally important is evaluating the extent to which the service benefited the community.

In addition to using a checklist containing important aspects of service-learning, educators can follow the K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice offered by the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC). Although some of these standards, such as the one emphasizing the importance of reflection, include similar content to the checklist previously mentioned, NYLC offers more information, often not included on checklists, to ensure that service-learning is implemented well. Thus, these standards can complement the checklists that researchers have created to ensure that desirable outcomes occur. As Figure 1 shows, NYLC [29] indicates that there are eight standards for implementing high-quality service-learning: 1. meaningful service, 2. link to the curriculum, 3. reflection, 4. diversity, 5. youth voice, 6. partnerships, 7. progress monitoring, and 8. intensity and duration. For service-learning to be meaningful, it needs to match students' passions and engage them in activities that are personally relevant. If pupils do not find it meaningful, they are less likely to develop deep civic and learning connections. Some of the ways to make service meaningful include honoring students' ideas and ensuring that pupils address authentic community needs.

Teachers also need to link service-learning to the curriculum to enhance what students are learning. If teachers fail to implement service-learning this way, rather than being considered an instructional strategy designed to promote academic gains by permitting students to apply what they learn in class, it will likely be regarded as an extracurricular activity.

Regarding reflection, NYLC indicated that this aspect of service-learning needs to happen before, during, and after service. Implementing reflection this way allows students to deepen their self-awareness, make meaning from experience, and apply what they learn to real-world contexts. Some of the examples of how teachers can implement reflection include organizing facilitated discussions and structured reflection circles. Service-learning should strengthen students' understanding of diversity by promoting collaboration and exposing pupils to diverse perspectives. By enhancing their knowledge of diversity,

students start to understand that the stereotypes they may have held are based on misconceptions. In contrast to volunteer work, service-learning is based on the idea that both the students and the recipients of the service have something to offer. Youth voice is about permitting students to participate in planning and implementing service-learning. Allowing pupils to have a strong voice is important because it encourages them to view themselves as change agents. Adults can encourage students to have a voice by mentoring them and serving as partners. They need to make sure pupils are supported and to guide them to develop sustainable initiatives. Implementing service-learning well requires mutually beneficial partnerships. These partnerships allow projects to be co-created with shared goals. Projects developed this way are enduring and impactful. An example of a partnership that was created this way occurred when a high school class developed a partnership with local businesses to renovate computers in order to offer them to families in need.

Progress monitoring involves assessing service-learning to determine its impact on communities and academic learning. The results are used for sustainability and improvement. This process involves exploring what worked, what failed, and how improvement can occur.

The last standard aims to ensure that a project lasts long enough, has the intensity to address the needs of the community, and leads to the learning outcomes students are expected to achieve. Short-term projects may not allow students to develop relationships and see beneficial changes. High-quality service-learning leads to sustained learning and a positive impact on the community.

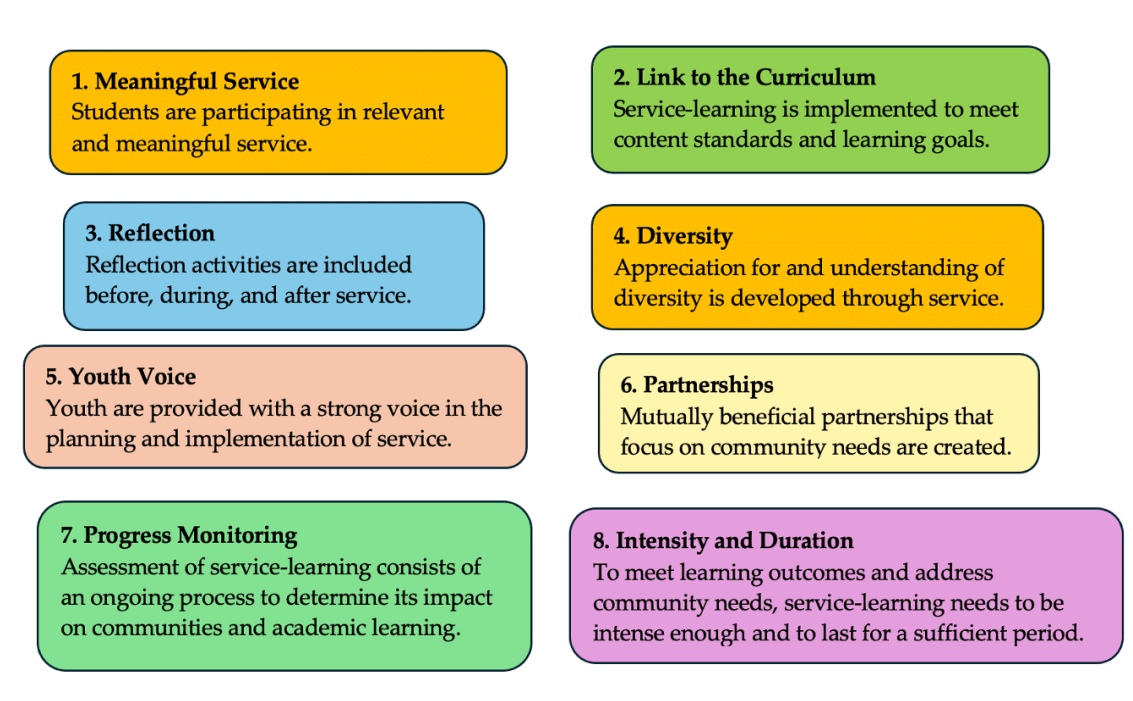


Figure 1. NYLC's K-12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality Practice. Source: National Youth Leadership Council ^[29].

Another strategy for implementing service learning well is to use the type of service learning that matches the age level of students in a given class and the area where the educational institution that pupils attend is located. Educators need to be aware that there are different forms of this approach and that one approach may not work as well as another. A solo face-to-face project that students complete out of school may work well with college students. However, since elementary students require more guidance and supervision to make sense of what they are experiencing, this kind of project is usually not the best one to use with students at this age level. Fortunately, teachers can select the approach to service-learning they feel will produce the best results. Jones and Lake ^[4] identified four approaches: direct service, indirect service, advocacy, and research. The direct service approach includes a face-to-face component that directly affects the participants who get the service from students. An example of this approach includes university students who tutor children in local public schools. Indirect service involves providing service without interacting with the people receiving the service. For instance, students can remove invasive plants that disrupt the ecosystem of which the community is a part. The advocacy approach involves informing others about an issue that affects the community to create awareness and action. Writing letters to elected officials to pass legislation for improving an aspect of a

community would be an example. The last approach, as the name suggests, is based on research. Students collect information on a topic that is in the interest of the community. They then present it using one of a variety of methods, such as creating brochures or videos.

5. Conclusion

Service-learning can help students learn and benefit community members as well. Many studies have revealed that favorable outcomes occur when service-learning is implemented well. One advantage of implementing service-learning is that this approach to teaching is flexible, allowing teachers to use it with any grade level in any discipline. Before teachers use this approach, however, they need to be knowledgeable about how to implement it well because poorly implemented projects can harm students and community members.

Fortunately, checklists and standards for implementing service-learning well have been published. These resources can help teachers avoid the harm that can occur when this approach to teaching is implemented poorly. By following the guidelines for implementing service-learning well, educators can create opportunities for students to make academic gains as they provide service to community members.

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