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Learning by Doing: Utilizing Service-Learning Projects[1]

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Are you looking for more from your service projects? Perhaps you are hoping youth members are taking more from last week's highway cleanup than memories of the disgusting sock they found along the way. When you turn a community service project into a service-learning project, your youth can make an impact on their community while simultaneously gaining new knowledge and skills. Service learning, done correctly, can increase the leadership, citizenship, and life skills youth gain within your 4-H program without additional cost or a substantial investment of time.

This information will assist you in planning and implementing a successful service-learning project. Service-learning projects tie together community service events with the experiential learning model upon which 4-H experiences are based (Smith, 1997). Not only can service learning increase leadership, citizenship, and life skills, but also research has shown service learning can help achieve educational objectives (Smith, 1997). Starting with the planning process, you will be guided through creating basic goals and objectives of the project, carrying out the service-learning project, and going through the service-learning cycle with your youth. This publication is one in a series on utilizing service learning with youth organizations, which includes topics on steps for successful club use, how to use reflection, and final evaluation.

How can I do this?

To undertake a service-learning project, it is essential that all the components are mapped out before starting the project, from the implementation of the actual project to the reflections and application. Additional questions or activities may be added as the project is going on, but the basics should already be settled upon. The group leader should guide the youth along the service-learning process, but without prior preparation, the outcome may not be as successful.

Service-Learning Model

It is beneficial to follow the Experiential Learning Model (see Figure 1) to plan the steps for the service-learning project. The model adopted by 4-H specifically for service learning was based upon Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Model. Kolb created a visual model of how to move youth from concrete learning experiences to more abstract learning experiences. 4-H has expanded upon Kolb's

original four-step model, creating a five-step model tailored to the needs of 4-H service-learning projects. The inclusion of reflection at multiple points in the service-learning process further emphasizes how reflection is "essential to the learning process," making the transition from concrete to abstract learning (Hatcher & Bringle, 1997, paragraph 4).

As seen in Figure 1, the service-learning process is divided into five steps with reflection opportunities throughout. A description of each section and corresponding examples have been provided below to help incorporate the Experiential Learning Model into practice.

Plan and Prepare

Just as with any other educational program, service-learning projects need clear objectives to guide the process. Yes, the project may be helping to beautify the county, but what should the participants learn from the project? For example, an objective may be to have the youth gain an understanding of the impact of littering on the environment. The focus on educational outcomes and the creation of learning objectives to accomplish those outcomes differentiates service learning from community service.

Examples of service-learning project objectives:

- 4-H members will examine the effects of littering on the environment through a highway cleanup service project.

- The youth will perform a demonstration on the correct method of repairing animal pens after participating in a one-day fairground cleanup.

- The youth will critique the effectiveness of the service project.

Experience Meaningful Service

Experiencing service is when members undertake the service project. The project should "result in some tangible community benefit while building student skills" (Richardson, 2006, p. 38). A highway cleanup would not be appropriate for the group if that particular community does not have a littering problem. Work with community leaders and those

Figure 1. Service Learning Cycle Credits: From "Beyond 4-H Community Service to Community Service Learning," by Smith, 1997, Washington, D.C.: Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture, p. 5. Copyright 1997 by the Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service. Reprinted with permission.

who are involved with other community efforts to identify projects that can provide community benefits. This may open doors for further support and collaboration in the future.

Begin the reflection process before the project is completed. Early reflection allows youth to start thinking about and processing the activity, thus increasing their learning. Incorporate reflective questions into the supervision of the project.

Sample questions to ask youth during the experience section:

- What can you try to make this easier?

- What other ways can we go about completing this project?

At this point, community service and service learning part ways. The next steps assist the members in taking the experience past merely "doing" into a greater learning experience. The reflection and application steps can immediately follow the experience. Youth may struggle to accurately remember the experience to be able to transfer the "doing" into useful knowledge if not encouraged to

reflect upon and apply their experience during, as well as after, the project has been completed.

Analyze and Generalize

This section of the service-learning process is designed for the participants to think through the experience they just completed, verbalize thoughts and ideas with the group, and listen to the thoughts of others. They are also given the opportunity to generalize how this particular service experience relates to their own lives and experiences. During reflection, members should be able to contribute to the conversation feeling that their thoughts and ideas are accepted among the group (Colorado 4-H Development, 2008).

Analyze

These questions gauge the immediate responses of the members to the activity, generates discussion about the feelings from present and past experience, and ties with current knowledge of the members.

Sample questions during the analyze part of the section:

- What did you do?

- What happened?

- What was the easiest part? Most difficult part?

- How did this make you feel?

- Were there any events that were reoccurring during the project?

- What issues seemed to occur repeatedly?

Generalize

When members generalize, they are sharing the "so what?" of the project.

Sample questions during the generalize section:

- Where can you see this problem in other places?

- What other areas (situations) could we do the same?

- How can you apply what you've learned in a new situation?

- What did you learn about yourself through this activity?

New Application

The application questions help guide members to summarize their experience, and then take it to the next level by applying the experience to their thoughts and actions.

Apply

This is the step when participants should take what they learned and apply it to their own lives and projects. An application project may be an appropriate follow-up experience. Service learning can be a continuous process that has a beginning but no defined end. Ideally, completed projects will inspire the development of new projects and increased benefits for the youth and the community.

Sample activities for application:

- Create a skit showing what the youth learned during the activity.

- Design a solution to the problem/issue that could be implemented in the community.

- At the next meeting, have 4-H members talk about or demonstrate what behavioral changes they have made in response to the activity.

Using Service Learning to Improve Youth Experiences

Transforming traditional community service projects into service-learning projects can help 4-H members learn more from the project. Service learning incorporates the goals of 4-H by developing leadership, citizenship, and life skills. Kielsmeier and Cairn (2005) found service learning positively affected each of these key areas for the youth. An increase in self-worth, citizenship, critical thinking skills, responsibility for their own learning, and facilitation of youth development were a few of the outcomes found. Service learning assisted youth in developing "a heightened sense of civic

responsibility and personal effectiveness through participation" (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000, p. iv).

Service learning has positive outcomes for the youth involved in the project, the adults serving as facilitators, and the community itself. Service learning was found to create an increased collegiality between staff, youth, and the community. Extension as a whole strives towards collegiality in all their programs (Kielsmeier & Cairn, 2005). Another outcome of service learning that Kielsmeier and Cairn found was the enhancement of public relations, which can be done by completing a service learning project with meaningful community impact. The community benefits from the human interaction that sometimes may be lacking. According to Kielsmeier and Cairn, depending on the service performed the community can encounter community development and renewal. Another outcome for the community is the creation of more involved citizens from the youth, whether they stay in their home community or move to another.

Through the utilization of planning, setting goals and objectives, carrying out the project, and reflecting upon the entire experience, service-learning projects can revamp the traditional community service project and bring many benefits to all involved. The utilization of service learning creates a brighter tomorrow for the youth, the staff, and the community.

References and Additional Resources

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