SERVICE LEARNING AS AN EDUCATIONAL STRATEGY FOR PROMOTING LOCAL AND GLOBAL SUSTAINABILITY

Authors: Brian R Shmaefsky and Cherith M. Letargo

Institution: Kingwood College

Country: USA
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Professor Brian R Shmaefsky
Biology Department & Service Learning
Professor Cherith M. Letargo
Geology Department
Kingwood College
20,000 Kingwood Drive
Kingwood, Texas 77339-3801 USA

Introduction

This paper presents a model on how service learning can be used to effectively teach students how to participate actively in shaping a sustainable future. Service learning appropriately provides students with improved possibilities to take part in sustainable changes. It also presents faculty with an innovative higher education tool that encourages a high degree of participation of students in various components of the curriculum. In addition, service learning is a reliable vehicle for institutional change towards improved participation in community and global development.

Social development research shows that colleges and universities are powerful entities for promoting sustainable initiatives at the local and global levels. Partnerships that
encourage sustainable technologies and life styles can be developed by forming joint ventures between the academic institution and community groups. These ventures can be used to encourage long-term programs that teach faculty and students how to recognize community needs that can be remedied with sustainable tactics. This presentation outlines a pedagogical method for incorporating service learning as a strategy for teaching sustainable development in college classes. The concept is applicable to humanities, sciences, and social sciences courses.

The project described in this presentation uses service learning to develop an awareness of the geology and impact of natural disasters by involving students in international service projects that restore communities devastated by these disasters. It is based on a model program funded by the North Harris Montgomery Community College District Faculty International Explorations Grant and is conducted under the auspices of the Gawad Kalinga organization in the Philippines. Students involved in this project provide a community in the Philippines with the knowledge and skills to transform the people into a sustainable population that counters the factors leading to poverty. The students learn to use sustainable strategies for rebuilding communities displaced and disrupted by the natural disasters they studied. It is hoped that this will become an international model of cooperation between academic institutions and community partners. The project directors also hope to use this as a model for assisting with local poverty issues.

Service Learning

Service learning is best described as a teaching strategy that enriches learning by engaging students in meaningful service to their academic institutions and local or global communities. Students involved in service learning apply academic skills to solving real-world issues, linking established learning objectives with genuine needs. They lead the process, with the help of faculty and community partners, by applying critical thinking and
problem-solving skills to concerns such as animal welfare, hunger, natural disaster recovery, natural resource conservation, pollution, and poverty.

College courses that use service learning show that it is a well-documented instructional approach for improving retention of course material as promoting civic duty awareness. It reinforces course content by involving students in volunteer community development activities that apply what they learned in class. Service learning can be defined as a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities. Service learning combines community service with classroom instruction. It focuses on critical, reflective thinking as well as personal and civic responsibility. Service learning programs involve students in activities that address community needs while developing their academic skills and commitment to community contribution.

Service learning is regularly used in American academic institutions to give students a better awareness of local and global sustainability needs. It has spread rapidly throughout Kindergarten through high institutions, colleges and universities. Many community organizations and governmental organizations take part in service learning endeavors with academic institutions. A recent 2001 survey conducted by a national service learning organization called Campus Compact gathered information on trends in community involvement and service across a representative cross-section of colleges and universities in the United States. During the 1999-2000 academic year, the 349 institutions that responded to the survey indicated that 712,000 students participated in some form of service learning activity, 12.2% of the college faculty at the institutions offered service learning courses, 6,272 service-learning courses were taught, and 9% of the institutions required service-learning courses for graduation.
The measurable outcomes of service learning include promoting learning through active participation in service experiences, providing structured time for students to reflect by thinking, discussing and/or writing about their service experience, providing an opportunity for students to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations, extending learning beyond the classroom and into the community, fostering a sense of caring for others. Authentic service learning experiences have been identified to possess certain characteristics according to the National Service Learning Clearing House in the United States. Included in these features are:

- Service learning experiences are positive, meaningful and real to the participants.
- Projects involve cooperative rather than competitive experiences and promote a variety of skills associated with teamwork and community involvement and citizenship.
- Service learning projects address complex problems in realistic settings rather than simplified problems in isolation.
- The projects offer opportunities to engage in problem-solving by requiring students to gain knowledge of the specific context of their service learning activity and community challenges, rather than only to draw upon generalized or abstract knowledge such as might come from a textbook. As a result, service learning offers powerful opportunities to develop critical thinking strategies.
- Service learning participation promotes deeper learning because the results are immediate and uncontrived. As a consequence of this immediacy of experience, service-learning is more likely to be personally meaningful to students. The experiences generate emotional consequences and challenge values as well as ideas. Thus, it supports social, emotional and cognitive learning and development.
Sustainable Education in Academic Institutions

Sustainability is being recognized by mainly international development organizations as the only rational way to build societies that use resources responsibly. Sustainability is an important and multifaceted topic of discussion for the higher education community. Higher education institutions need to embrace sustainable development as an essential topic within the classroom. Colleges and universities need to encourage students and the community served by the academic institutions to internalize the importance of a high quality of life through sustainability. They can achieve this by expanding student and community awareness of how to create a more healthy and equitable world for all people. In addition, academic institutions can by the incubator for driving creative problem solving through hands-on experimentation using student and community input.

Typical sustainability curriculum components have the following student learning outcomes:

- Stimulates ownership and responsibility in personal and everyday actions as well as their social actions and decisions within their community.
- Empowers students to evaluate their actions and helping them make more consistent decisions that benefit all beings.
- Increases critical thinking skills and deep problem solving by using cyclical reasoning and real-world examples to better understand class subject matter.

The overall goal of building a sustainability culture teaches students and the community to anticipate and prevents problems rather then following the unsuccessful model of trying to react and fix deleterious situations after they occur. Sustainability education also teaches that future accounting processes associated with development must reflect all long-term environmental and economic costs and may not be consistent with those practices of the current market. It also shows people how to make the best decisions
based on sound, accurate, and up-to-date information. Effective sustainability education demonstrates how to live off the interest the environment in a manner that provides and not destroys its capital base. Another sustainability value is that the quality of social and economic development must take precedence over quantity. Lastly, a sustainability culture instills a respect for nature and the rights of future generations.

Academic institutions can use their current infrastructure to build in a sustainability component for educating students and the public. Many colleges and universities already promote sound economic development and celebrate the cultural diversity needed to build sustainable societies. They can use their science programs to increase the biological diversity and complexity of the ecosystems locally and globally. At the same time, academic institutions can use the resources of their arts, humanities, and social science program plan stabilized populations and resource consumption at a level that is within the carrying capacity of local and global ecosystems.

It is well-recognized in the high education literature that sustainability education is a long-term effort that transforms students and the community at all levels in order to promote a mindset change necessary to achieve an accurate and coherent vision. Higher education has the influence to be a leader in building a sustainable future by exercising its role in training the next generation of community leaders, professionals, and teachers that guide the insights and policies needed to face the challenges of rebuilding a society willing to live equitably and conserve natural resources.

An underlying philosophy of sustainable education is that it is not merely a concept that is taught as any other subject in the classroom. The facts making up sustainability principles are only the bricks and mortar that build the infrastructure. Students and the community cannot just be told to memorize principles of sustainable development. They need to experience and work within a model sustainable situation. Academic institutions must provide a dynamic learning environment in which to explore what a sustainable
lifestyle means. The model must place students and community members in an environment with the following attributes:

- A social mindset that gives hope for a future with a healthy environment, a strong economy, and an equitable society.
- An intellectual climate that gives people an understanding of the important role each individual plays in designing and creating a sustainable future.
- Experiences that allow people to work directly with their entire community, including educators, government officials, community members, and the business community.
- A learning environment that effectively combines engaging and relevant content with high quality pedagogical strategies.

Service learning is a natural pedagogical tool for building a sustainable education program that educates students and community members according the criteria described above. It can be used as a supplement for individual courses, a capstone project for a degree program, and a hands-on component of community training workshops.

Gawad Kalinga and the Humble/Kingwood Fil Am Foundation

As part of its sustainability education efforts, Kingwood College partnered with Gawad Kalinga and Humble/Kingwood Fil Am Foundation. Gawad Kalinga (GK) translated in English means to “to give care”. It promotes alternative solutions to the blatant problem of poverty in the Philippines and nearby developing nations. GK’s vision for the Philippines is a slum-free, squatter-free nation through a simple strategy of providing land for the landless, homes for the homeless, food for the hungry and as a result providing dignity and peace for every citizen. Gawad Kalinga is more than building houses for the poor as is true with other benevolent projects. It advances the production of
sustainable communities that reduce poverty and contribute to the productivity of the nation.

Gawad Kalinga promotes four basic sustainable development principles: shelter and site development, child and youth development, health, productivity, community empowerment, environment, and mabuhay (a celebratory toast meaning “long live”). Shelter and site development involves building colorful, durable and secure homes for the extremely poor. It also includes the construction of other physical structures such as walking paths and drainage systems, water and toilet facilities, a school, a livelihood center, a multi-purpose hall and a clinic. In some areas, other structures such as basketball courts and libraries are also constructed once basic infrastructure needs are set up.

Child and youth development entails a value based education for children in the GK community. Children are provided with academic tutorials, sports and creative workshops as well as a very solid values formation program through a program called SAGIP, which means “to save a life” in the Filipino language. Scholarships are provided to those with the mental aptitude to pursue higher education. There is also a strong youth rehabilitation program where juvenile delinquents are provided with a range of activities and counseling sessions to help them live productive lives without committing them to rehabilitation institutions.

The health aspects of GK involve programs for community health care. The health profile of every family in a GK community is carefully monitored by a volunteer team of doctors and paramedical practitioners usually in an on-site clinic. Malnutrition especially among children is addressed and arrested not just through feeding programs but also through parent education regarding proper nutrition and hygiene. Productivity is achieved through developing a livelihood for the community. GK conducts livelihood and skills training and provides start up capital and materials for microfinance and micro-enterprise. It also assists in the marketing of the GK communities’ products. Food self sufficiency is
highly encouraged by teaching technology for backyard farming, urban agriculture, and poultry production.

Community empowerment is achieved through the formation of neighborhood associations. They are established to inculcate a stewardship that ensures accountability, cooperation, and unity within a community and between different communities. Guidelines for community living are decided upon by the members, and new leaders who espouse the values of the association start to emerge. Peace is achieved not by force, but by mutual adherence to an agreed set of values. This new culture is the key to the community’s sustainability, and sets the community on the road to self reliance. Environmentally sustainable development is important to GK. GK empowers the poor to become caretakers of the environment instead of being its exploiters. GK teams are encouraged to plant fruit-bearing trees in and around GK communities and produce seedlings for tree-planting. They educate the poor in solid waste management in partnership with environment groups and government agencies who provide their expertise and resources in these projects.

A philosophy called “mabuhay” encourages the beneficiaries of GK communities to showcase the best aspects of the Filipino culture: warmth, hospitality, and the many colors and dimensions of our rich culture. GK aims to make every village a tourist site modeling the inherent charm and uniqueness of each community. Visitors are welcomed by joyful community residents who are proud of their homes, grateful for their blessings and hopeful for the future. GK is introducing performance arts such as painting and sculpture and literature to the communities to strengthen the Filipino identity and to make the GK residents proud of their national origins.

The Humble/Kingwood Fil Am Foundation is community organization in Texas made up of Filipinos and people of other national origins interested in the mission of Gawad Kalinga. They partnered with Kingwood College to provide learning opportunities for students and community members interested in building sustainable communities for
the poor. The Humble/Kingwood Fil Am Foundation is funding the development of GK village in Lipa City, in Batangas, Philippines. It also plans to raise money for a school in another village. The school will likely be built by Kingwood College students and community members taking part in a travel course to the Philippines.

Kingwood College Project

Kingwood College is building international sustainability components to its science curriculum. Currently, the college works on local sustainability issues in the Houston area through program coordinated by the Service Learning Office. The international endeavor involves an honors environmental geology class that provides a teaching strategy in which students travel abroad to study natural disasters and then work on international service learning projects with an international community organization to restore communities devastated by natural disasters.

This endeavor will serve as a model for teaching students the following sustainable development skills:

- How to integrate science concepts with social issues.
- How to design appropriate civic responsibility volunteer programs.
- How to assess factors that contribute to poverty and social strife.
- How to design universal models for resolving local and global societal issues.

It will also show students how to resolve the problems of the effects of natural disasters on people, lifestyles, economy, and resources. As part of the curriculum, students will take on opportunities to assist the mission of the GK agency locally with the Humble /Kingwood Fil Am Foundation. They will help with public awareness, fundraising, and organizational work.
Students will also be given the opportunity to assist GK directly through travel to Philippines. The project in the Philippines involves three succession phases:

- Phase 1: Students assist in building Humble /Kingwood Fil Am Foundation (HKGK) village which will consist of 30 homes and a school.
- Phase 2: Students will provide opportunities to make the HKGK village a sustainable community.
- Phase 3: Students will use the HKGK Village as a “laboratory” for teaching and developing a sustainable community in other countries.

As part of the venture in the Philippines, students will design projects to keep the community sustainable by researching sustainable methods of agriculture using high yield native crops, energy production by converting biomass to fuels, and by planning microeconomics cooperatives. Other community organizations in the vicinity of the college will be providing support to finance the student project in the Philippines. There are also efforts to invite community members to take part in an educational travel program uses service to teach them sustainable methods of rebuilding communities displaced by natural disasters.

Conclusion

In summary, Kingwood College has brought together the Geology and Service Learning departments to build a model for teaching sustainable education. It will apply service learning to effectively teach students how to participate actively in shaping a sustainable future. The model gives faculty an innovative higher education teaching tool that encourages an elevated degree of participation of students in various components of the curriculum. In addition, model is a reliable medium for institutional change towards improved participation in community and global development. The model will train
community members as well as students on sustainable development principles that can be applied locally and globally in developing and developed nations.
References


