



## With Common Core State Standards, Why Service Learning Matters Even More

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What motivates us to our work as educators? While raising test scores and achieving accountability may be critical to our everyday tasks, most of us entered education to make a difference in the lives of children, families and communities---to provide children with optimum learning experiences transferable to their lives outside of school, that guide them to adulthood with a solid sense of personal efficacy, and the ability to make choices and decisions healthy for themselves and our society.

For this to actually occur, students benefit from real world applications of their academic learning while they are still in school, with a research-based approach called *Service Learning*. This allows them a laboratory to practice, review, reassess, and reflect, all with the guidance and support of knowledgeable teachers. They see the viability and purpose of their study. This process actually adds rigor to academics as students are depended upon, builds interdisciplinary understandings, and deepens learning, all while improving the viability of the Common Core State Standards.

“A growing body of research shows that students engaged in high-quality service learning learn to collaborate, think critically, and problem solve. These same deeper learning skills are necessary for students to master the Common Core and meet the expectations of Common Core authors and advocates.”

*Linking Service-Learning and the Common Core State Standards: Alignment, Progress, and Obstacles, Education Commission of the States*, by Lisa Guilfoile and Molly Ryan, April 2013

### Common Core and Student Engagement

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) serve as a guide for purposeful learning with real world application. Many CCSS descriptors and elements comprise essential 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies well suited for our 21<sup>st</sup> century learners. With Common Core integration the aim is for students, through academics, to develop and hone their ability to read closely so as to analyze, interpret, and synthesize information and ideas, collaborate with others, and utilize refined language skills to present information through writing and speaking with the support of technology. All of the unique standards add up to a desired outcome as seen in the CCSS outline of seven “Capacities for the Literate Individual,” a “portrait of students who meet the standards.” This summative document describes students who:

**1. Demonstrate independence**

They read complex text independently, and question and clarify information. As self-directed learners, they seek appropriate resources (teacher assistance, peers, print and digital media) to increase understanding.

**2. Build strong content knowledge**

As purposeful readers, viewers, and listeners, they research to increase general and content-specific knowledge and understanding. They share knowledge through writing and speaking.

**3. Respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline**

They shift tone, word choice, and selection of evidence to best fit the writing context.

**4. Comprehend as well as critique**

They question the veracity and bias of their sources.

**5. Value evidence**

They evaluate evidence and use evidence effectively to construct arguments.

**6. Use technology and digital media strategically and capably**

They navigate media to find useful information, integrate online and offline sources, and choose tech tools wisely to best support their intentions.

## 7. Come to understand other perspectives and cultures

Students seek to understand other cultures, communicate with others, and evaluate perspectives of themselves and others.

This description of literate individuals is what we hope teachers keep in mind, rather than preparing students to pass standards-based tests. Passing such tests will be easy for students if they truly possess the capacities listed above.

So, we know where we are going; how do we get there? Of critical note regarding Common Core State Standards is this: They provide an outline of *what* we want students to be able to do, however the *how* of the process is left to us, the educators--those who prepare and design the day-to-day programs and curriculum and greet learners as they arrive at this place called "school." We then have the choice of determining prime methods for integration. We can choose learning to occur only in the classroom with evidence of learning being observation, exams and tests. Or we can provide a more authentic context for the *application of the learning*, and by so doing elevate students' abilities and understandings, assist them in seeing why learning matters, and recognize they already are people of value to society.

Will this approach motivate students? Everyday challenges often center on how we deliver the curriculum in ways that motivate the learner; motivating them beyond doing the minimum to truly becoming involved with the content. We observe the lack of motivation daily. All a teacher has to do is give an assignment and hands fly up as students ask: *What do you want me to do?* This is a powerful indicator that students want to be told step-by-step, inch-by-inch how to meet the requirement, complete the task, do what's necessary to please the teacher. What is lacking in this scenario? Student engagement best recognized through thinking, initiative, problem solving, and many other descriptors from the list of capacities for the literate individual. Ultimately what is missing is the *wanting* to learn.

In actuality, we may not be able to motivate anyone. Motivation comes from within. However, if we *engage* a person, there is a likelihood the person will choose to be motivated. The question then becomes, How can we best engage students in a learning process that maximizes their ability to meet and exceed the Common Core State Standards in our daily classrooms and encourages the habits of learning we want to see? What methods and pedagogies best inspire intrinsic motivation while increasing the likelihood of student accomplishment and engagement?

We are all familiar with the idea of service in communities and service in schools. Service learning however has distinctive aspects that separate this pedagogy from what we often call "community service" or "project-based learning." With high quality service learning, students:

**Classroom Spotlight:** Maureen's students engaged in conversation evaluating and critiquing the ways that schools operate. Their key complaint was that in order to be a "successful" student, they had to simply focus on completing tasks. The depth and likelihood of internalizing the information they were learning and the skills they were developing was second to simply being able to show the knowledge and skills in the brief time of testing. Based on this conversation, the class developed a motto, "Are you learning, or are you just getting it done?" A poster posing this question hung in the front of the classroom. This was a reminder to the students to invest themselves in the greater purpose in their work, and to their teacher to be sure to be helping students engage in meaningful learning experiences that would encourage intrinsic motivation.

When the academic and service connection is deliberate and includes student initiative, authenticated needs, reciprocal collaborations with community partners, and meaningful reflection, we call this *service learning*.

- ▶ Increase academic rigor through relevance and application of content and skills
- ▶ Participate in social analysis as they investigate an authentic community need, typically through action research using media, interviews, surveys, and observation
- ▶ Take initiative, make plans, and follow through on their ideas
- ▶ Engage in inquiry based problem solving
- ▶ Use literature---fiction and nonfiction---to advance knowledge
- ▶ Experience intrinsic growth rather than depend on extrinsic rewards
- ▶ Find out about an array of career opportunities as they develop as social entrepreneurs
- ▶ Make global connections to increase international-mindedness
- ▶ Integrate cognitive and affective development as they develop an aptitude for becoming reflective
- ▶ Apply acquired knowledge and skills in purposeful ways that benefit other people or the planet while showing evidence of learning

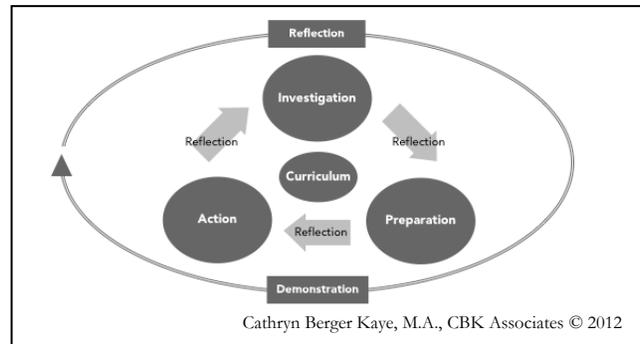
Does this sound suspiciously like many of the desired outcomes listed for the Common Core State Standards? Yes.

Can we integrate service learning in our schools today? Absolutely. Service learning is already deemed a valuable educational approach in schools across the globe. Implementing service learning in a manner that garners these desired results raises the question: How does a teacher implement effective and meaningful service learning?

### The Five Stages of Service Learning

If you imagine that the Common Core State Standards are the ingredients, the Five Stages of Service Learning are the recipe. This framework constitutes a process that is key to students' effectiveness and critical to their learning transferable skills and content. Even though each stage is referenced separately, keep in mind that they are linked together and often experienced simultaneously. Visualize how overlays are used in an anatomy book to reveal

what is occurring in the human body system by system. Each stage of service learning is like one of these overlays, revealing one part of a dynamic interdependent whole.



**Investigation:** Includes both the *inventory* of student interest, skills, and talents, and the *social analysis* of the issue being addressed. This analysis requires gathering information about the identified need through action research that includes use of varied approaches: media, interviews of experts, survey of varied populations, and direct observation/personal experiences.

**Preparation:** Includes the *continued acquisition of knowledge* that addresses any resultant questions from investigation along with academic content, identification of groups already working towards solutions, *organization of a plan* with clarification of roles, responsibilities and time lines, and ongoing development of any *skills* needed to successfully carry the plan to fruition.

**Action:** Includes the implementation of the plan that usually takes the form of *direct service, indirect service, advocacy, or research*. Action is always planned with mutual agreement and respect with partners so this builds understanding and perspective of issues and how other people live.

**Reflection:** Reflection is the *connector between each stage of service* and also *summative*. Through reflection students consider their thoughts and feelings (cognition and affect) regarding any overarching essential question or inquiry that is a driving force of the total experience. Reflection informs how the process develops, increases self-awareness, assists in developing future plans, and employs varied multiple intelligences.

**Demonstration:** Student demonstration *captures or contains the totality of the experience* including what has been learned (metacognition) and the service or contribution accomplished. Beginning with investigation, students document all parts of the process, resulting in a complete and comprehensive ability to tell the story of what took place during each stage that includes key informative reflection. Students draw upon their skills and talents in the manner of demonstration, often integrating technology.

### **A Middle School Service Learning Experience**

In many schools, we see the good intentions of a food drive to help the local community. Consider how a food drive can be transformed when teachers and students engage in the Five Stages of Service Learning.

Personal inventory may reveal that some students are excellent at persuading people to act, others may be artists, others mathematicians. Math and service can go far beyond simply tracking and graphing donations as you will soon see.

Investigation of the community need through media, interviews, surveys, and observation and experience may clue students in to specific needs of the food bank or organization connected with the food drive. By visiting food collection centers, students may discover how commonly donated items are frequently discarded. For instance, though the intentions of those who donate cake mix are kind, the reality is that most clients of a food pantry do not have a kitchen or access to eggs or milk needed for the final product. When students analyze the results of their investigation, they develop a clearer understanding of the community need. Through an interview they may learn that while food banks overflow from November food contributions, in the spring the shelves are relatively empty; this has led to student initiative for rescheduling their school's participation.

Preparing for the food drive may involve an historical study. In a cross-grade social studies research endeavor, eighth graders attending Mineola High School, Mineola, Long Island, partnered with eleventh graders to create a timeline showing the history of hunger in the United States along with the government and community response. The findings guided students in creating their own plans.

Another example of preparation takes place in a seventh grade math classroom. Kate O'Sullivan at Bay Shore Middle School, Bay Shore, Long Island, connects her lesson on ratios, proportions, and percents to pricing. Students see the real-world application for their math skills when they evaluate the cost of various items at restaurants and the grocery store. Understanding the comparative cost of items and reading about how access to healthy food varies among neighborhoods helps students recognize how and why food poverty and a lack of nutritional options are problems in low-income

areas. To add cultural context, literature can be a valued resource, even within a math class. For example, *What the World Eats* by Peter Menzel and Faith D’Aluisio, takes the reader to twenty-one countries to see what people purchase for their table. This easily has interdisciplinary connections.

Rich investigation and preparation support meaningful and purposeful action. When students connect academics with an authentic community need, they “own” the issue. Students are then inspired to develop a campaign for the food drive that includes persuasive letter writing, posters, multi media advertisements, and more. They may exhibit more commitment to bringing lessons from the past into the present based on their social studies preparation work. From learning ratio, proportions, and percents, they may want to prepare and distribute a shopping guide to help shoppers stretch their dollars. Such a guide might also be distributed to clients at the food pantry. Action, when imbedded in the framework of the Five Stages of Service Learning looks like much more than placing a box in the hallway and counting up the number of cans collected.

Though reflection is listed as the fourth stage of service learning, it is important to remember that reflection occurs throughout the service learning process. When students pause to consider their own learning and actions, they deepen their understanding and take more mindful next steps. One way to conduct ongoing reflection is to provide students with a copy of the CCSS and ask them to consider which standards they are meeting by engaging in the service experience. These standards are set for our students. They are not a secret! Students can benefit from knowing how their hard work and study along with action taken in the community combine to develop the specific skills.

Demonstration is a key component in the service learning process and may lead to another service learning experience. Consider what happens when students in the math and social studies classes demonstrate their service experience to their other content area teachers and to their peers. As students show photos of a food bank and footage of an interview with the director, model a math inquiry that led to a brochure, and read a reflective narrative of insights gained, the depth of learning is palpable. This has proven a motivator for other teachers to explore service learning possibilities for their classes, and definitely increases the numbers of students asking their teachers to engage them in service learning opportunities.

The example above includes clear connections to the CCSS. Students examine key ideas and details of historical texts [Reading Anchor Standards 1-3]. By creating a shopping guide, they write informative/explanatory text [Writing Anchor Standard 2]. Their campaign advertisements may contain all three types of writing called for by the CCSS—argument, informative/explanatory, and narrative [Writing Anchor Standards 1-3]. In creating the shopping guide and advertisements, students engage in the writing process, utilize technology, and conduct research [Writing Anchor Standards 4-9].

Educators often question where and how the CCSS allow for differentiation of instruction. One way to address this is for the teacher to move up or down within the grade-specific standards for each of the Anchor Standards named above. During the personal inventory phase of service learning, students consider what skills and talents they can lend to the success of the process. In addition, teachers may consider where students need to strengthen their skills and assign roles accordingly.

Let’s move from grade-specific standards to the larger picture that we painted at the start of this article—the Capacities for Literate Individuals. Students demonstrate independence by conducting research through media, interviews, surveys, and observation/experience. They increase their

content knowledge through their social studies research and math writing. They respond to varying demands of audience, task, purpose, and discipline, when they develop their campaigns. Throughout the entire process, they comprehend as well as critique, value evidence, use technology and digital media strategically and capably, and come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

### **Service Learning Matters Because . . .**

With service learning, student ideas become a reality; the excitement genuine. Contributions made are significant with students and their community as beneficiaries of the process. By discovering and applying their interests and talents along with academic content and skills and knowledge, students bring the Common Core State Standards to life. Service establishes a purpose for learning. Students and the exceptional educators who engage them prove to be valued contributors for our collective well-being, now and in the future.

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