



Common Core and Service Learning

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By Maureen Connolly

In the coming years, we are going to be hearing a lot about preparation for college and the workforce. Is this preparation the sole purpose of education? The Common Core State Standards focus us as educators on career and college readiness; however, we must make sure that as we work with our students toward this readiness, we also guide them in the development of strong character. When we turn on our televisions, we are bombarded with shows about competition, cheating, lying, and scandal. These themes are prevalent in our news programs as well as our sitcoms, dramas, and, of course, reality TV. How does the promotion of such behaviors affect society? In 2011, Richard Weissbourd surveyed 40 students in an independent school's 11th grade. He found that over one-third of those surveyed "identified 'getting into a good college' as more important than 'being a good person'" (23). How might some of today's leaders on Wall Street have responded, when they were 11th graders, to questions about balancing advancement with citizenship? Would making money have trumped (pun intended) being a positive contributor to society? For the sake of today's students, who are living in a world with confused messages about morals and consequences, we need to revamp our approach to character and education as we revamp our educational standards.

Service learning helps students meet high-level academic standards and provides practical opportunities for students to develop character by working together to apply their learning for the common good of their school, local, and/or global community. Below is an example of Common Core State Standards–based service learning that engaged my 9th grade ELA students for two months. The five stages of services learning—*investigation*, *preparation*, *action*, *reflection*, and *demonstration*—are italicized within the description. Also, Table 1 shows how the experience helped students meet the standards. It is my hope that readers of this article will recognize service learning as a teaching methodology that creates an ideal balance between the academic skills and knowledge called for by the standards and the social progress that can be made by students with strong character.

Student Researchers

For the reading portion of the Reader/Writer Workshop, my freshmen read a young adult novel of their choice. After they read each third of the book, the 9th graders completed a packet in which they responded on a personal level to the work, analyzed the author's use of literary devices, and recorded new vocabulary words. The writing days, during which students focused on research, were part of the *investigation* phase of service learning. They wrote about a local social issue that they believed needed addressing. Topics ranged from healthy eating to littering and recycling to honoring our veterans. I find it interesting and sad to note that the majority of students focused their research on bullying. This continues to be a major problem for today's youth. Based on their findings, students wrote argumentative essays on why action needed to be taken regarding their chosen social issues. These essays were powerful, heartfelt, and research-based.

Student Educators and Advocates

Students became invested in doing something to address their chosen social issues, so we discussed the importance of advocacy. How could 9th graders inform others about their causes? The freshmen quickly realized that they needed to become teachers about those causes. They formed groups based on the social issues they wanted to address and used the annotated bibliography within *The Complete Guide to Service Learning* (Kaye, 2010), along with some follow-up Internet searching, to choose an appropriate children's book to read to the 3rd graders.

Once the book was chosen, students entered the *preparation* phase by creating a lesson plan for a 3rd grade class. The 9th graders based the plan on their reading and experiences during Reader/Writer Workshop comprehension and analysis activities, their research regarding the social issue, and the information presented in the book. This in itself was an eye-opening experience for many students, because they thought that teachers make up their lesson plans on their way to work! Each lesson plan included reading the book and asking basic comprehension questions, guiding students with a worksheet about the literary elements or devices used in the book (this paralleled the reading tasks that the 9th graders had completed in their own reading portion of the Reader/Writer workshop), appropriate discussion questions regarding the social issue described in the book, and a plan for immediate action.

The 9th graders created their action plans by evaluating an annotated list of agencies published by our local volunteer center. They chose the agencies that they wanted to help, came up with plans, and contacted the agencies to make sure that their

plan was addressing a genuine need. This brought about a bit of excitement, because it allowed the students to use their cell phones in the classroom. The 9th graders and 3rd graders took action together by drawing alphabet books for an adult literacy center, writing thank-you letters to soldiers living in our local veterans' hospital, and creating cards with supportive sayings to be shared with other elementary schools to create positive feelings in an atmosphere in which bullying often prevails.

When the 9th graders returned from working with the 3rd graders, their *reflections* varied. Some said they could not wait to become teachers. Others reported that they never wanted to teach. Many discussed the challenges of working with the 3rd graders—lack of focus, chattiness, fidgeting, and so forth. Some 9th graders realized that they still had these poor habits themselves. During the days following our trip to the elementary school, I noticed an increase in the maturity levels of my freshmen. They empathized with their teachers, and after returning to the classrooms of their childhoods, they wanted to indicate to themselves and to others that they were no longer children. They were powerful, thoughtful, and considerate young adults.

Students *demonstrated* their thoughts and feelings about this experience by using decoupage to create a collage of the book covers, along with quotes and advice for the 3rd graders, on a bookshelf. This became the 3rd graders' service learning bookshelf. All books placed on this shelf connect with social issues and service.

Common Core Connections

Table 1 represents the ways that this experience aligns with and enhances students' ability to meet the Common Core State Standards.

Table 1. Common Core State Standards Addressed During the Social Issues Literacy Experience

Students' Actions	Standards Addressed
Developing a research-based argument essay	<p>Writing Standard 1: "Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence"</p> <p>Writing Standard 7: "Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation"</p> <p>Writing Standard 8: "Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism"</p> <p>Writing Standard 9: "Draw evidence from literary and informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research"</p>
Choosing appropriate books and creating lessons and handouts for the younger students	<p>Speaking and Listening Standard 4: "Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience"</p> <p>Speaking and Listening Standard 5: "Makes strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations"</p> <p>Speaking and Listening Standard 6: "Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate"</p>
Reflecting by creating the service learning bookshelf for the 3rd graders	<p>Speaking and Listening Standard 5: "Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations"</p>

Source: From Common Core State Standards, by the Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010. Adapted with permission.

A Rationale for Service Learning

According to a survey of over 400 employers in the United States by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resource Management, students are not graduating high school prepared for the workforce. The skills rated as most deficient in our graduates are professionalism/work ethic, teamwork/collaboration, oral and written communications, and critical thinking/problem solving (The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008). Service learning requires students to use and develop all the applied skills listed by the researchers. When involved in service learning, students must work hard, collaborate, express themselves clearly, and think deeply about their choices.

More ideas for connecting the standards with service learning that support these applied skills can be found in my book, *Getting to the Core of English Language Arts, Grades 6–12: Meeting the Common Core State Standards with Lessons from the Classroom*. My coauthor, Vicky Giouroukakis, and I discuss the benefits of the Common Core State Standards for the teaching of reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language, and we provide lessons from the field for grades 6–12 that effectively guide students in meeting these standards. Each lesson includes ideas for service learning connections that will ensure that students' learning experiences are rigorous and purposeful.

Noted service learning consultant Cathy Berger Kaye writes that the type of practical thinking needed for service learning "answers the question, 'why am I learning this?', which illuminates purpose" (Kaye, 2010, p. 13). When engaged in service learning, students will not need to ask why they are developing a certain skill or studying a particular book, because they will be able to see how that skill better enables them to take action or how the content of the book further informs their understanding of the need for action. As schools progress in their implementation of service learning, students may begin to design their own learning around the causes that matter most to them. They may see school as a place where they can go to make changes in their world. This purposeful view of learning will certainly lead to increased academic and character development for our students.

References

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Maureen Connolly, EdD, is the coauthor of Getting to the Core of English Language Arts, Grades 6-12: How to Meet the Common Core State Standards with Lessons from the Classroom. Dr. Connolly has been an English teacher at Mineola High School on Long Island, N.Y. for 15 years. She has also worked as a professor of Education at Molloy College, Adelphi University, and Queens College. She has overseen service-learning grants for the New York metropolitan area and collaborated in several publications related to service learning. In these roles, Dr. Connolly has developed many standards-based initiatives that link community outreach, character education, and literacy. She has been awarded the title of Honoree for the ASCD Outstanding Young Educator of the Year and granted the LEAD Award by St. John's University. In addition, she was selected by Teachers for the Global Classroom for an international fellowship in Morocco. Her international experience also includes volunteering to teach in India, Ghana, Peru, and Spain. Dr. Connolly has presented workshops on the Common Core State Standards, literacy, Shakespeare, and service learning at regional, national, and international conferences. She believes that at the core of her profession is the need to develop purposeful learning that opens students' eyes to the potential for positive change in themselves and in their local, national, and global communities.