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How Service-Learning Can Ignite Thinking

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At its best, service learning involves students making meaningful connections to their own community and feeling empowered by the experience. Unfortunately, in the elementary years, student service-learning is often a one-shot effort[1] in which adults make decisions for children,[2] preventing them from truly having a hand in the project's direction and purpose. Knowing this, we wondered, what kind of thinking would be promoted by a sustained (lasting more than a few hours) and co-constructed (by adults and children) service-learning project?

For one year, three educators from The Pennsylvania State University observed one teacher's combined first and second grade classroom, focusing especially on her efforts to plan and carry out service learning projects with the children (and not imposed upon them). From this research, we offer six explanatory themes that illuminate how service-learning can promote various modes of thinking: thinking globally, thinking locally, thinking historically, thinking across curriculums, thinking empathetically, and thinking reflexively. The classroom teacher, Lori McGarry is the second author of this article. Lori's work with her students at Dewey Elementary School provides an example of how children can be asked to think about human needs, assess their own abilities, and then make connections with a local homeless population, making a difference for individuals who happen to be homeless.

Thinking Globally

Lori began her first year of teaching with a unit on habitats. But what was supposed to be a typical unit of five or six lessons grew into a year-long study about homes and homelessness. She explained that it was natural to connect the idea of animal habitats to human habitats, "It's not just the need for food, water, and shelter, but for *healthy* food, *clean* water and *safe* shelter for all living things." To make this animal-human habitat connection, she read a popular children's book, *Fly Away Home*,[3] about a man and his son who end up homeless and living at an airport. During a discussion about the book, one of her students shared that he had visited New York City and seen homeless people begging for money. Another student said that she had been to China and seen homeless people there as well. The children were emotionally engaged with these stories about human "habitats," especially with regard to this new issue of homelessness. Yet, homelessness still seemed like something distant and even alien, since the examples we had considered so far came only from a children's book and from distant places like New York City and China.

Thinking Locally

To help students connect their questions about homelessness and healthy human habitats to their local community, Lori partnered with the mother of one of her students who served on the board of the local homeless shelter, Centre House. Despite her apprehension as a first-year teacher, Lori followed her students' interests and invited Susanna, a board member, to speak. The students learned that Centre House was once a professor's home. Now it often shelters one or two families, up to 19 people, depending on the families' configurations.

One student asked, as if to confirm, "So this is here, in State College?" It was clear that most of the students had never suspected there were homeless people in their own comfortable, university town in central Pennsylvania. After all, the valley was named "Happy Valley" from its imperviousness to hardship during the Great Depression and, more recently, had fared relatively well during the country's economic downturn.

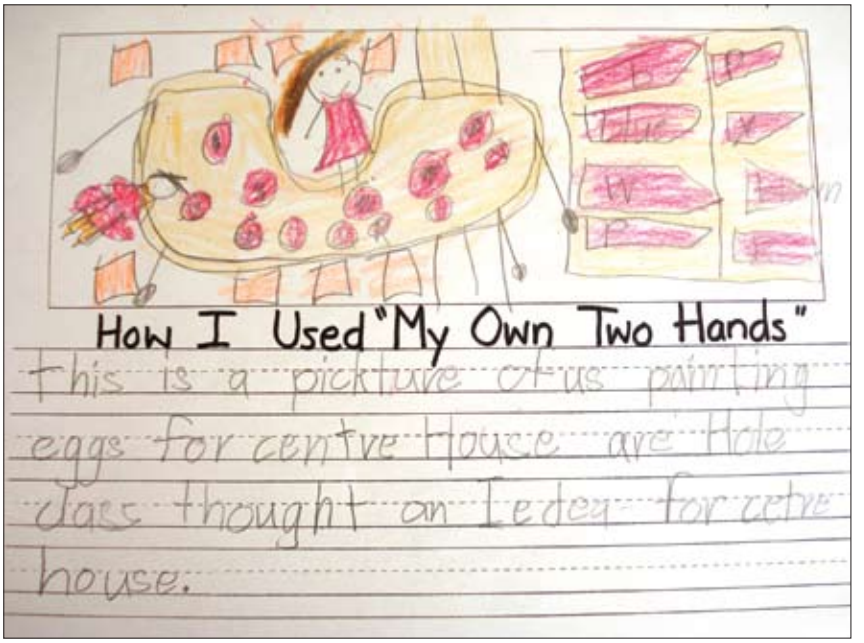
The students examined photos of the inside of Centre House and commented that it wasn't "homey" or "cozy," particularly in contrast with their own homes during the holiday season. Within moments, students were asking, "What can we do to help?" Lori was somewhat surprised because, at the beginning of the year, many students in her class had been struggling with self-centered behaviors like cutting in line, name-calling and purposefully ostracizing students on the playground. Here, in the face of an identified community need, these same students were showing a more caring side.

Lori brainstormed with the class possible ways that they could help. Students asked questions about the residents' needs, listened to Susanna's responses, and developed solutions that took those needs into account. For example, students wanted to provide food for the residents. After learning that Centre House

had limited refrigerator space, they revised their proposal to provide fresh fruits and vegetables. Instead, they would make healthful, non-perishable trail mixes. Students also learned that the residents did not have room to accept donations of clothing or games, but that they would appreciate winter decorations to make their temporary home more "cozy."

Thinking Historically

When students think historically they interpret what happened in the past and what it means, going beyond memorizing names, dates and facts.[4] As the weeks progressed, Lori's students also interviewed their own families about how and when they came to live in State College. In sharing some of their findings with peers, students saw clear themes emerging about circumstances that affect family life, such as job changes, community safety, and family health. They began making connections between the changes in their own families and how their local community—including Centre House—had changed over the years. Students completed a brief writing exercise on the topic of what they liked about their own homes.



Although they had started the year by thinking about homes and homelessness as a global issue, these young students discovered that there was a local need for emergency shelter. They observed how local government officials had coordinated with a nonprofit group to answer that need by initiating Centre House. They also learned about some things they had in common with the residents of Centre House, such as the need for a safe place to eat and sleep, as well as the history of their town.

Thinking Across Curriculums

As a first year teacher, Lori was excited, but overwhelmed--she wanted to find time for her students to work on the service project, and she had to make sure she was covering the curriculum for the year—for first graders and for second graders both! Surprisingly, she found myriad curricular connections. Instead of artificially "tacking on" concepts or facts here and there, Lori was able to promote deeper connections and conceptual understandings.

Once Lori began looking broadly at her curriculum through the lens of the students' project, she found numerous connections in reading, writing, social studies, science, and math. She created a chart to organize the ways in which she would integrate the project into the curriculum while following the iterative steps of service-learning: identify a problem, investigate it, research solutions, implement a project, evaluate the results of your efforts, celebrate with other, and reflect about the whole experience. Instead of teaching service-learning as an "add-on" to other lessons, she began addressing academic standards more flexibly through the engaging, authentic, and student-driven vehicle of community service. This step is what turns service into service-learning—the experience is intentionally integrated into the curriculum to promote thinking and learning with a larger purpose.

Thinking Mathematically

While making the trail mix with her students, Lori was able to offer a better way of understanding basic fractions. The students' not only "got it" [fractions], they were much more engaged than when she'd explained fractions previously on the board. "They had a purpose for learning it," she added. Later, when they divided food into baskets for the residents, the children were especially motivated by fairness, making sure that the goods were evenly distributed among the baskets. "Division used to be something 'hard,' something that older children did. Now my students were understanding what division meant and why it was so important." Division, in context, meant equality and fairness to them.

Thinking Scientifically

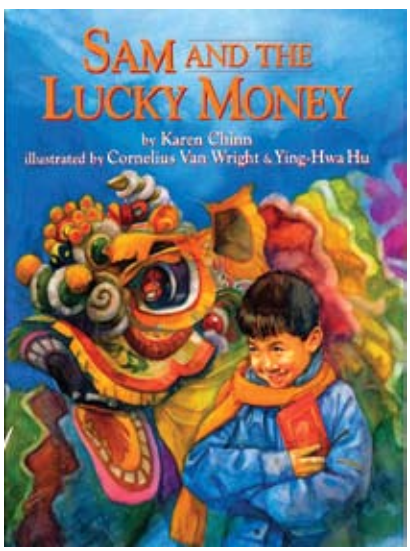
The students made a connection between animal habitats and human habitats by considering how all living things need healthful food, clean water, and protective shelter appropriate for them. They also applied their study of a science unit on solids and liquids to making trail mix (solids mixed with solids) and baking breads (separating solids and liquids) for Centre House residents.

Thinking Artistically

The children knew intuitively as they examined the photos of the shelter that a "home" should have a certain aesthetic,

Student-created placemats spread out on the floor.

a comfortable look and feel. To add this touch to Centre House, the children sat outdoors to draw a winter scene from their school's yard. Then, they wrote about the outdoors using descriptive language. They took these renderings indoors to create watercolor paintings, and they used their writing to make "list poems" to accompany their art. These paintings and poems were then laminated and used as placemats at Centre House, making things more "homey" there.



Thinking Empathetically

Lori found another children's book that got students thinking about homelessness. In *Sam and the Lucky Money,* a boy receives some money for a holiday and is able to go downtown and shop.[5] While downtown, he almost trips over someone's feet. It's a man who is homeless. "Where are his shoes?" Sam asks, as he also begins to learn about homelessness. In the end, Sam decides to spend his lucky money to help the man. He says to the man, "You can't buy shoes with this … but I know you can buy some socks." The students were riveted by this story, said Lori. One student, Leov, was clearly inspired.[6] One week later, after discussing it with his parents, he brought in $12 that he had saved to go toward supplies for Centre House. He and Lori chose the supplies together. Leo wrote a letter to Centre House explaining, "I decided to bring some money for supplies… I thought that it would be helpful. "

Examples of students' empathetic thinking became for frequent. Lia, another student, made a card for the residents of Centre House in which she drew a family and labeled them "You guys." Lori pointed out to her student that the family was the exact configuration of Lia's own family. Maybe people who were homeless were not so different from themselves.

After the winter break, the students were excited to receive a thank you letter from Centre House. One line in the letter

astounded them: "The children at Centre House really like the decorations you made." One student voiced the class's surprise, "Children live there?!" Lori could "see the wheels turning" in their heads. "What might they need?" another student asked.

Constructing a Survey

Homelessness was becoming a less distant (and less scary) idea as students considered that they were helping other children. Although the students couldn't solve poverty, there were some things that they could do to help, as they considered how people meet basic needs in the absence of a traditional home. The students' motivation to continue the project was high, and the service-learning project took on "a life of its own."

By spring, students independently approached Lori to ask what else they could do for Centre House. They expressed concern that the residents might be "getting sick of trail mix," and so they decided to create a survey inquiring about residents' needs. This is an essential part of good service-learning—not presuming what one can do to help the other, but asking. Good service is a two-way street of learning, communication and information sharing.[7] Survey questions included, "Would you like us to send more food? If so, would you prefer more trail mix or other food supplies?" and "Do you need anything specific for the children at Centre House?"

Some ideas for service that the children brainstormed included: donating stories that they themselves would write and illustrate, and donating gently used toys. The students insisted upon including an open-ended question in the survey, "Are there other needs you have that we did not mention above?" From that question, they learned that the residents especially appreciated how the students had "hand crafted something for each person." Although the children wanted to go visit Centre House (to be able to craft various items for specific residents there), they were not allowed to visit in order to protect the privacy of the residents. Lori explained that people often desire some privacy in times of trouble, as well as support from friends and community.

Buddies, Not Bullies

While the project was ongoing, two students in Lori's second grade class began an anti-bullying group called the Fuzzy Buddy Club. The students explained that the club's mission was to "stop bullying and spread kindness in our community." At the end of the year, they bestowed the club's responsibility on two first grade children at a class meeting to insure the club would continue. Lori had "no idea they were going to do this" and was touched that they had chosen children who embodied the values of friendship and kindness, regardless of their academic strength or popularity. Although we do not suggest that a project of this sort is a remedy for the ills in schools, we see within this particular context a clear change in classroom climate.

Thinking Reflectively

In order to assess student learning, Lori incorporated systematic reflection throughout the project. She began with a writing prompt during the first week to gather baseline information on how her students viewed and described their own homes. As the project progressed, Lori provided additional opportunities for students to reflect on their learning through a combination of writing, drawing, and discussion in the classroom. Student reflections over the course of the project demonstrated how their conceptions of "home" changed from a place defined by material possessions to one where important physical and emotional needs are met.

The class concluded the year by presenting its work to the entire school. Their presentation began with a written reflection. Reflection is an essential part of service-learning[8] and can take many forms. Lori's students were asked to listen to the lyrics of "My Own Two Hands" from the movie *Curious George* and to consider, "How did we make a difference? What did we learn?"[9] One child described how she had painted for the shelter, while reporting that "the whole class thought of an idea for [how to help] Centre House."

Conclusion

Our observations suggest that an emergent student-driven service-learning project can be connected to curriculum and promote various modes of thinking. We noticed that these first and second graders were most engaged when they could imagine the people, especially children, whom they served. According to American sociologist, C. Wright Mill.[10] the "sociological imagination" is a capacity to shift from one perspective to another—it applies imaginative thought to the asking and answering of sociological questions: Are there homeless people in our small Pennsylvania valley? What can we, even as first and second grade students, do to help them? Answering these questions demands the type of thinking that can solve real-world problems, collectively.

While many first year teachers may not be able to adapt to such an emergent curriculum, this example shows how finding a space to listen to children's wonderings and concerns can spur motivated learning. Lori described that while this project did require time and dedication from the teacher, it was worth the results—in the ways her students' thinking changed and matured. "I spent several afternoons meeting with our community partners, organizing my own unit plan, and selecting additional resources, such as read-aloud books that I would need to introduce concepts or scaffold student learning. However, the time was well worth the investment, as I believe students were significantly more engaged in writing, math, science, and social studies lessons when we connected our academic work to helping our friends at Centre House." Lori found that she was not merely "covering" the standards that she was responsible for teaching. Rather, her students were highly motivated and learning with purpose, making deep conceptual academic con-

With information from their Centre House liaison, Susanna, students created meaningful products for the residents.

nections as well as social and civic ones. As we write, Lori is in her second year of teaching, retaining half of her students, as her first graders became her second graders. These students are continuing their service project, using their science period to grow lettuce hydroponically. The harvest will be donated to Centre House. While it may not be possible to integrate service-learning daily, this example shows how being open to an emergent and sustained service-learning curriculum can promote depth, connectedness and purpose in children's thinking.

Even by starting with "the global" (which may seem backwards to the usual elementary curriculum), connecting students to "the local" can ground them in the civic, historical, and societal context of their place, and foster an ability to make a positive contribution. The kind of thinking we promote in schools matters to the world we want to sustain and the one we want to create.

Notes

1. Andrew Furco, "Issues of definition and program diversity in the study of service-learning," in S. H. Billig, ed., *Studying Service-Learning* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).
2. Roger A. Hart, "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship," *Innocenti Essays* no. 6 (UNICEF International Child Development Centre, June 1992).
3. Eve Bunting, *Fly Away Home* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1991).
4. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).
5. Karen Chinn, *Sam and the Lucky Money* (New York, NY: Lee & Low Books, 1997).
6. All students' names are pseudonyms.
7. Sue Ellen Henry and M. Lynn Breyfogle, "Toward a New Framework of 'Server' and 'Served': De (and Re)constructing Reciprocity in Service-learning Pedagogy," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 18, no. 1 (2006): 27-35.
8. Rahima C. Wade, "Service-Learning," in L. Levstik and C. Tyson, eds, *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 109-223.
9. Jack Johnson, "My Own Two Hands," a song from the *Curious George* movie soundtrack. Search on the title at www.cduniverse.com for the lyrics. CD at ww.curious-george.com.
10. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1959).

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