

Service Learning for Character and Academic Lessons

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Your [service learning] program has allowed me to reach students that I thought were unreachable. Their entire outlook on school and on life has changed drastically; I truly cannot thank you enough.” – 6th grade Teacher

Here is a bold claim. Service learning is one of the best teaching strategies for students to gain a mastery of important lessons in both academics and character. While acknowledging the practice of service learning can be time consuming, research has validated positive outcomes in academic learning, student attitudes and behaviors as a result of well implemented service learning. These positive outcomes encourage a close inspection of teaching through service and justify the reason Character.org’s 11 Principles of Effective Character Education recognize service learning as exemplary practice.

What is service learning? Let’s compare service learning with the more widely recognized strategy of community service. There are multiple distinctions between service learning and community service as highlighted in the following table. While community service can be a very positive experience, the comparison here will help define service learning and suggest why service learning is a powerful teaching tool.

Service learning by definition seeks to engage students in selecting, planning, leadership and reflection while teachers help guide the service activity to gain mastery in specific academic objectives. Community service does not have these same expectations and in its simplest form is often an exercise in adult direction of student service.

Character can be practiced and formed in both community service and service learning. Both strategies encourage students develop empathy for those they serve and learn cooperative work skills to complete their service. Service learning, however, has the additional explicit character goal of promoting student leadership skills along with the expectation of reflection to anchor lessons and seek improvement or celebration of a project well done.

Community Service	Service Learning
Community need identified by adults and not necessarily perceived as meaningful to students	Meaningful community need identified by students in collaboration with adults
Generally planned by adults	Planned by students with adult guidance
No specific curricular connection to project	Specific curricular connections highlighted in project by adults with student recognition
No requirement for reflection	Reflection required by definition of service learning and can occur during project planning, during project implementation and/or after the project work is completed
Students participate in service generally with adult leadership	Students participate in service with student leadership whenever it is age appropriate
No requirement for evaluation	Students and adults create evaluation rubrics and follow-up to complete evaluation at project completion in addition to students’ grade for project work

Service learning projects can come in many forms and be applied to almost any subject area. With teachers acting as a guide, students can identify meaningful community needs where academic content is clearly connected. Cross-generational and local-to-global projects are possible where the community can be defined as within a teacher's classroom or the community might expand to a global need in a foreign country.

The School for Ethical Education (SEE) helped facilitate service learning projects for nine years as a federal Learn & Serve grantee. Over 6,000 students completed service learning projects in SEE's [Youth: Ethics Service program](#) (YES).

YES projects have included: student writing projects that capture the stories of local seniors, older students teach younger students the learning needs of special students, environmental projects, art projects in support of food banks, Character Clubs, mobile museums to teach younger students local history, youth philanthropy in support of service learning and academic integrity interventions.

One particular project stands out for its intergenerational and local to global impact. The Books of Hope program sought US students to write, illustrate and bind short stories with positive messages for donation to Uganda children orphaned from their nation's civil war. One goal was to give as many Ugandan orphans a copy of their own book to practice reading with an inspirational story—thus Books of Hope.



In one Books of Hope project, an inner-city eighth grade class collaborated with primary grade students to write, illustrate, print and bind their Books of Hope. Middle school students were partnered with their primary school collaborators, which provided a rich mentoring opportunity as a local service project. In addition, these eighth graders recognized the desperate need of the Uganda students and spontaneously chose to supplement their book shipment with additional school supplies from money they earned through a bake sale. Local-to-global service with lessons in story writing, illustrating, printing and binding along with the inter-age collaboration provided a rich service learning experience for all involved.

Service learning is recognized as a powerful teaching strategy to engage students in a variety of academic and character lessons. Character.org and The School for Ethical Education have many online resources to help teachers learn about and put into practice effective service learning. Start small—a within-the-class tutoring project—would require no expenditure of funds and encourage mastery learning while building a respectful class community. Experiment with service learning and choose to teach one lesson with service this spring.