

School Libraries in Action: A MASL Research Journal

**Community Service in Schools: How Community Service
Impacts Students and Their School Environment**

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Project Summary

School systems and educators teach important skills; skill that will benefit students throughout their lives. Still, many students struggle to believe that their courses will apply to them. Students want to know why they are learning and how it will be used in the future and benefit them in their chosen careers. Schools and educators are challenged with making clear the practicality and various applications of what students are learning. As an educator, I appreciate that students want to know how to apply their knowledge. Each person's learning is different and unique, which also means that each person's application should look different.

One of the best ways, according to literature review, for students to demonstrate learning, practice newly learned skills, and make their learning practical and unique to them is problem-based learning (PBL). Problem-based learning occurs when students identify and analyze a problem, discuss reasons and outcomes of this problem, formulate and research a solution, implement a solution, and analyze the results. Some of the benefits of PBL include student engagement and ownership over the process, a deeper understanding of the original knowledge or concept, and the ability to use a combination of prior knowledge and skills to problem-solve in the future.

The definition of service learning is when students interact with the community in a way that benefits both parties: the communities benefit because of the service completed there, and the students benefit due to application of knowledge, soft skills (such as communication and organization, etc.), and community engagement. It is through service learning that students gain real world experience and discover the benefits of involvement and service to the community. Especially in young adults, this service learning is often their first encounter with

contributing to a larger community. They often do not know their ability to make an impact until they put a plan into action.

Project Context

The action research was conducted at a high school with students in grades 11 and 12 participating. The students were enrolled in a semester-long course called Contemporary Literature. The study was conducted by an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher who is also a candidate for a master's degree in Information Science & Learning Technologies. There was no control group; the point of this project was to encourage community involvement and service learning in combination with problem based learning methods. Students had to work in groups to complete the assignment, which was entirely student-led.

Review of Literature

In order to best discuss and design PBL and service learning units, we must establish a clear definition. Khalil and Saeed (2008) define PBL as, "a teaching methodology employing contextual learning while working with real-world problems." The practicality of such hands-on learning promotes cooperative, collaborative learning, identification of knowledge, research where knowledge gaps exist, and synthesizing and presenting information. Problem-based learning units generally follow several steps: students form small groups, students are presented with or identify a problem, students use prior knowledge to create a working starting point, students research and draw conclusions based on prior and new knowledge, and

students present their findings to the appropriate audience. The student-centered approach is designed to, “promote critical thinking and to encourage a desire for life-long learning” (Khalil & Saeed, 2008).

Service learning is 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” (National Commission on Service Learning). Service learning’s expected outcomes include relationship-building, improved academic performance for students, engaging classroom curriculum, teamwork, developing future career goals, promoting civic responsibility, encouraging reflection, and offering mentoring opportunities (Harris, 2014). Service learning combines traditional learning methods with community service, making it relatively simple to integrate in any course. Sook Lim and Bloomquist (2015) identify three major purposes for this service learning which include enhanced academic and civic learning, benefits for both the students and the community, and collaboration with other students or community organizations to achieve goals.

Both problem-based learning and service learning have existed for years, but it was not until more recently that these approaches became more widely used outside of academia. Colleges and universities had been using the methods for years, particularly in the medical and library science fields. In 1993, Indiana University -- Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) established the IUPUI Center for Service and Learning in order to fund and support civic engagement activities (Ball & Schilling, 2006). Several other universities have built and staffed similar service and learning centers as well. Now it is common for teachers in elementary,

middle, and high schools to incorporate problem-based learning and service learning into the classroom.

The library's role in both problem-based learning and service learning is essential. Library educators have recognized the value of practical information seeking and experiential learning for years. The library field is a service and community oriented field (Sook Lim & Bloomquist, 2015). Units and courses in which PBL and service learning are embedded, provide opportunities for librarians to showcase the library's resources, introduce students to proper research techniques, and develop a relationship with the librarians and the library itself. Units or courses structured to include PBL and service learning also allow the librarian to forge relationships with teachers and co-workers that benefit both parties and ultimately the students. Nancy Kranich charged libraries with the responsibility to encourage "democratic discourse and community renewal" (2010). This social consciousness creates life-long learners and agents of social change. The projects further allow the library to play a role in defining the community, be it a social agency, university, school, city, town, business, or non-profit organization (Ball & Schilling, 2006). This can greatly impact students' worldview, exposing them to different environments and cultures. Kimmel, Howard, and Ruzzi (2016) even say that service learning should not occur in the immediate educational environment in hopes that the student's personal involvement and personal impact will be heightened. Rather, it should be a real world experience that allows for local, collaborative projects with members of the community.

In combination, PBL and service learning methods create an end product that benefits students and the community. Solving the problem means more than a presentation; it means

having an impact on others. The service learning aspect takes the problem solving skills (which are clearly applicable to real-world situations) and uses them to go and do something. The student-led approach allows students to develop leadership skills and take ownership of their project and its results. It further equips students with practical skills and personal skills such as confidence, leadership, ambition that can ultimately create meaningful learning experiences (Khalil & Saeed, 2008).

Method

Data Collection

1. *Surveys* – Students will complete a survey gauging progress and student engagement after the projects are completed.
2. *Interviews* – The ELA teacher will conduct interviews with randomly selected students in regards to their opinions of the projects and the ultimate impact on students.
3. *Written Reflections* – Students will complete a written reflection that outlines their overall plan: identification of the community, identification of the community's needs, the development of a plan to serve the community or meet a need, group interactions, and personal impact.

Data Analysis Plan

All data collected were analyzed at the end of each semester. The survey was completed online; the interviews were conducted by an outside source and recorded for review; the written reflection was submitted at the summation of the semester. The results were used to

determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the community service projects and the PBL/service learning methods.

Methodology

The teacher guided the students by suggesting that they first identify their communities and a need or a problem that exists within the community. Students brainstormed a list of the different communities they were involved in or wanted to become involved in. They also brainstormed a list of problems. From there, students broke into smaller groups and chose a focus for their project and followed the steps of problem-based learning by clearly identifying a problem or a need and working through potential solutions and obstacles. They created a plan that included a timeline, a clearly defined end goal, essential contacts, resource lists, and researched when necessary. After carrying out their plan and completing the project, students wrote a short reflection evaluating their process, their end results, the things they would change in the future, their own personal performance in completing the project, and the project's ultimate impact on them.

Teacher and Librarian Roles During the Process

While the teacher was there for guidance , the projects were student-led from start to finish. As mentioned above in the review of literature, the teacher or librarian should act as a facilitator and a mentor. It is the teacher or librarian's role to model expected behavior and generate "buy-in" from students. This buy-in may be generated from a grade, a genuine heart for community service, a need for resume or college application material, or a desire to work with others that have a common interest . The students should design the entire project:

leading discussions, brainstorming, researching, planning, and reflecting. The teacher should use this time to encourage students to think big, brainstorm resources that may not have yet considered, monitor progress, and approve projects as necessary. The librarian specifically should use this time to advocate for the library and its resources, demonstrate effective research skills, and be available to both answer questions and ask questions to guide them.

Outcome

Some of the assignment outcomes included community performance events that were advertised and used as fundraisers for literacy organizations and book drives that yielded thousands of books. Some students started websites where they could post book reviews and recommend books to others, and some students went to elementary schools, hospitals, and nursing homes to provide books and read with people. The projects became a great marketing tool for the course and were eventually used as the class final. The best way to teach the idea of a reading community seems to be to get students involved in one.

Summary of Survey Results

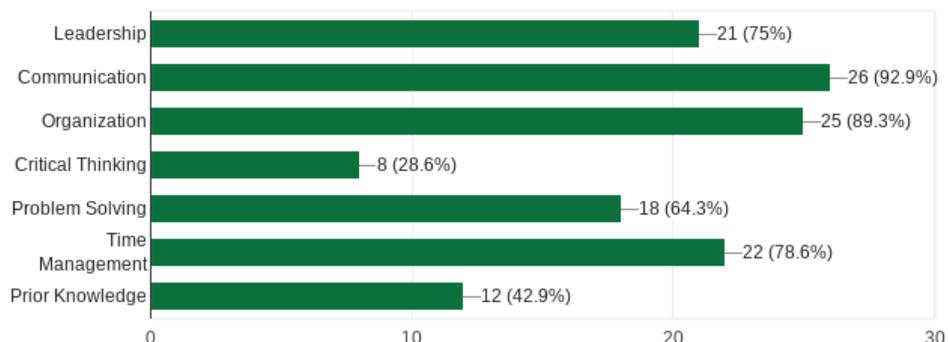
The survey results revealed positive reactions to the community learning projects. The survey was ten questions, consisting of both multiple choice and checkboxes. It was released to 40 students of varying backgrounds, all of whom participated in the projects; there were 21 responses. The low number is most likely attributed to early graduates who do not still check their high school accounts, low participation from students failing the course, or student absences.

Overview of Survey Results

- Seventeen students (81%) reported that the project positively impacted them; only four (19%) felt that they were either unaffected or negatively affected. In reflection, I should have rephrased the question and answer choices to obtain more specific, interpretable results.
- Sixteen students (76.2%) felt that the project positively impacted their leadership skills; three were neutral (14.3%); and two (9.5%) felt like they were not impacted.
- Thirteen students (61.9%) felt a stronger sense of community after having completed the project; four students (19%) were neutral; and four students (19%) felt no change in their sense of community.
- Sixteen students (76.2%) felt the project was personally beneficial; four students (19%) were neutral; and only one student (4.8%) felt the project was not at all personally beneficial.
- Seventeen students (81%) felt the project was beneficial for the communities; three students (14.3%) were neutral; and one student (4.8%) felt that the project was not at all beneficial for the community.
- Sixteen students (76.2%) felt actively engaged in the community project from start to end; three students (14.3%) felt neutral; and two students (9.5%) did not feel actively engaged in the project from start to end.
- Students were asked to check the skills they felt they used during the project process. The choices are leadership, communication, organization, critical thinking, problem solving, time management, and prior knowledge, respectively. The results are below.

What skills helped you complete the project? Check all that apply.

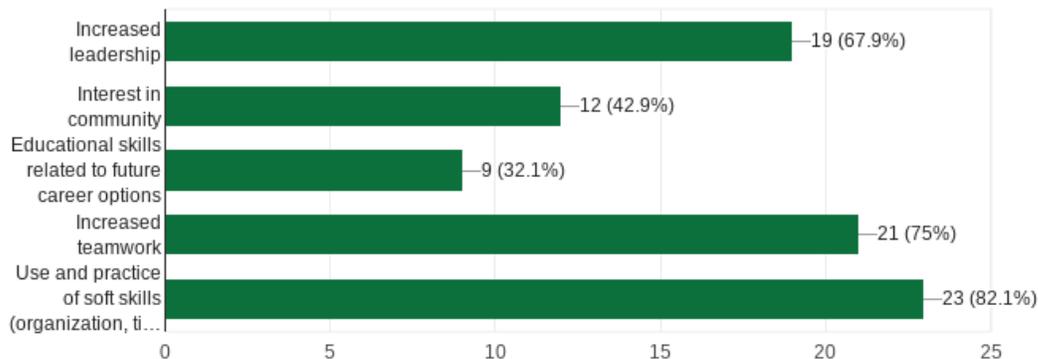
28 responses



- Only ten students (47.6%) felt it was important that the projects were entirely student-led; seven students (33.3%) felt that it was somewhat important; four students (19%) were neutral; and no students felt that student leadership was not important .
- Eighteen students (85.7%) considered themselves active community members, and three (14.3%) did not view themselves as active in their community.
- Students were asked about the effects of the projects on them personally. The choices are increased leadership, interest in community, educational skills related to future career options; increased teamwork; and use and practice of soft skills, respectively. The results are below.

Did completing these projects have any of the following effects on you?
Check all that apply.

28 responses



Reflections

At the high school, engineering and medical explorations courses were already using problem-based learning and optional service learning to complete projects and compete in engineering fairs. However, those courses were the only ones using this model and actually sharing the results. After surveying a number of teachers within the building, it was clear that many of them were using elements of the PBL and service learning models, but not in combination or only in part. One of the most important elements of PBL is to share and reflect on results, yet that is the step most teachers seemed to be missing. For example, one of the history teachers had her students put together pamphlets each year on different aspects of voting: candidate overviews, polling place maps and etiquette, etc. They are very well done and well-researched, but they are never used for anything other than the teacher's grade. In this case, the students are demonstrating knowledge and using it practically -- by creating materials that would be informative and helpful for the general public -- but the information is not then disseminated farther. This was the foundation upon which I constructed my problem-based and

service learning component. Since implementing the projects, the students, library, school, and community have seen a plethora of benefits and growth.

Students who are given the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge in student-led, personalized ways are more engaged and willing to set and meet high expectations for themselves. First, is the importance of attracting students and obtaining buy-in. Second, is the importance of organizing a strong plan. Third, there is a definite difference in the projects students were willing to undertake. However, the amount of work put into a project does not always correlate with the project's ultimate impact on the student or the community. Students must weigh project ideas and their own strengths and knowledge in order to determine the best course of action. Fourth, service learning projects have already become a tradition. Finally, the benefits of student leadership are clear. Throughout the interviews, students repeatedly mentioned appreciating the freedom to choose and complete their own projects. Through their self-chosen projects, students report an increased sense of community belonging, confidence, and organizational skills.

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