

# Building Bridges to the World: Utilizing Service Learning During the Senior Year to Develop Participatory Citizenship

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## Abstract

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*The senior year of high school has the potential to be a bridge between childhood and adulthood, but senior courses are not vastly different than courses offered to freshman who are barely into their teenage years. A service learning component that is embedded throughout the senior year provides students with the space to think critically and then act, thus engaging in participatory citizenship. Teachers should, however, scaffold students' movement toward community participation by establishing a service-learning framework that combines critical reflection with classroom community.*

**Key Words:** *Service Learning, Critical Reflection, Community Building, Participatory Citizenship*

No longer children, high school seniors are edging towards the adult world. Yet, eighteen-year-old seniors are often treated as dependent youth who need to be filled with their elders' knowledge before they can be trusted in adult society. Schools push academic content that is geared toward college preparation and may leave students disconnected from the world in which they will actually live. This college-preparation focus has dominated students' final academic year in public secondary schools for almost a century (Bailey, 1975; Blanchard, 2013; Conley, 2001; Harnly, 1939). Traditional structures of education may assist in developing content knowledge, but they do little to support students in becoming participatory citizens in the world that is waiting for them after high school. In contrast, Freire (1970) argued that education should function as, "the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (p. 34).

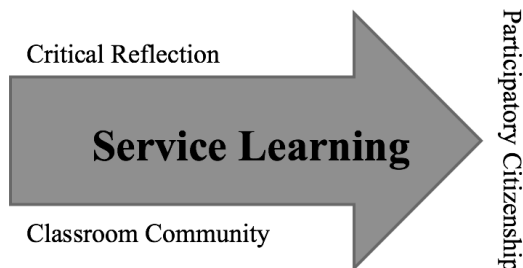
Experiential learning through service, coupled with academic critical reflection and classroom community, can develop participatory citizens who are better prepared for the world around them. Instead of placing high school seniors into holding tanks, secondary schools could provide a bridge that connects academic knowledge with adult democratic citizenship through service-learning. Standing on this bridge, students could have a view of their future in the world while still connecting to their academic past.

Through service learning, teachers combine the highest levels of learning in Bloom's Taxonomy with the highest levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in order to create a curriculum that fortifies the bridge from adolescence to adulthood. By opening the door for experiential, relevant learning, service-learning allows students to be participatory citizens rather than passive novices. The benefit of service learning is two-fold: (a) it revolves around organized active participation within the community that encourages civic engagement and compassion, and (b) it creates structured opportunities for application of academic skills and knowledge (Billig, 2000). This article will discuss key concepts of service learning, and it will show how a senior course based on service learning can allow students to engage with the world in ways that move them towards participatory citizenship while still encouraging the development of rigorous academic skills.

### A Framework for Service Learning

In a review of research on citizenship education programs throughout America, Lin (2015) characterized participatory citizenship as, "mainly concerned with certain attitudes and dispositions related to thinking critically about social issues and finding solutions to various problems" (p. 3). As they cross the bridge that connects their adolescence to participatory citizenship in the real world, students need careful scaffolding. The framework for service-learning proposed in this paper (Figure 1) cultivates students' participatory citizenship through a service-learning curriculum in which critical reflection works in parallel with classroom community.

Figure 1.



The framework shown in Figure 1 does not treat the service as an isolated event; it scaffolds necessary skills throughout the year. The development of critical reflection and classroom community is nurtured from the beginning of the year. After senior students have gained necessary skills through the foundational aspects of critical reflection and classroom community, they begin to move towards participatory citizenship. However, this framework is not necessarily linear. Once critical reflection and a sense of classroom community have been developed, they are never left behind. Rather, these aspects continue throughout the service learning project. As each aspect of the framework is discussed below, a theoretical discussion is paired with practical illustrations that are based on my experiences with a service learning project in which the high school was a partner with a local women's outreach center.

### Critical Reflection

The framework for developing a bridge towards participatory citizenship begins with critical reflection. Reflection is the process of careful self-examination, which Dewey (1938) considered to be the highest level of inquiry and imperative to disciplined intellectual growth. Critical reflection requires participants to investigate the roots and consequences of social issues. Through critical reflection, students develop a critical consciousness, which requires them to move beyond awareness to become actively involved in identifying problems and areas of need (Freire, 1970).

Having a critical consciousness is foundational to transformation towards participatory citizenship because it allows students to participate in controlled inquiry. This inquiry requires that students look within themselves before looking outward. For teachers, student critical reflection is a form of formative assessment through which the teacher can gain knowledge of any underlying assumptions and biases that might be destructive to the community partner and to the students themselves. A group of young adults entering an arena of need, one very different than their own, may barge in with a patriarchal attitude or savior mentality that can destroy positive relations with the population being served (Hullender et al., 2015; Shabazz & Cooks, 2014). Students' shared reflections can help teachers become more aware of subconscious issues so that they can make adjustments and act as a guide for emergent participatory citizens.

One way to initiate the process of critical reflection is a visual narrative like a mind map. Before ever pursuing the actual service project with the women's outreach center, students created a mind map by placing the word "gender" into a circle in the center of the map. Then they wrote down all things that came to mind in relation to gender in the satellite circles around that topic. The mind mapping allowed students to explore components of their own identities and worldviews that influenced their thoughts on gender

issues before going to work within the women's outreach center. In addition to the personal reflection, students continuously read discipline-based texts that applied to the experiential learning in the upcoming service field.

Leading up to their class service project and while students were building the project, the teacher still acted as interpreter and guide. The teacher chose textual pieces that applied to women's issues and allowed the students to develop connections to those texts, which revolved around issues of violence against women, single-parenting, poverty, and health issues. Through the mind map and the readings, students participated in personal internal reflection and external reflection on the world around them.

As suggested by this framework, reflection activities began before the actual service project and continued throughout the duration of the project. Those activities included recurrent written critical reflections such as freewriting, blogging, journal entries, and essays. No matter the avenue for critical reflection, the prompts and guides targeted issues within the service project in order to encourage students to explore components of their sense of self and consider that self in relation to the service area.

In addition to addressing assumptions prior to service, critical reflection gives students a space to download new knowledge and growing perspectives before, during, and after service projects. Critical reflection allows students to address gaps in background knowledge, check understanding of objectives, and ask questions based upon the service experience. Students can be led towards needed discussions that will assist them in transformation and growth.

Engaging in service learning may bring students into a contact zone where their experiences conflict with their beliefs or their perceptions of the world. Such conflicts can potentially cause trauma, but not all trauma is negative. Pierce (2008) explained that it is the teacher's responsibility to facilitate positive trauma rather than negative trauma:

Simply inviting conflict, or clash of cultures -or worse, playing on preexisting asymmetrical relations of power - without a responsible, informed methodology, is an invitation for negative trauma. When reflecting on the pedagogical wisdom of inviting conflict into the space of the classroom, then, instructors must ask themselves this: Where is the line between healthy, productive cognitive dissonance and the type of emotional and intellectual frustration that stymies educational growth – the line between positive and negative trauma?" (pg. 65-66).

If teachers facilitate meaningful reflection and debriefing before and after students enter the contact zone, the traumas that result from conflict with their perceptions can develop into meaningful learning experiences. These meaningful learning experiences that developed through the service project are

considered positive trauma. The process of critical reflection can offer a safe place for students to release and download stresses of paradigm shifts. When critical reflection is done with purpose and clear academic objectives, it can be a powerful tool for change. Through the process of critical reflection, students are given the power to explore their own assumptions and social biases.

## Classroom Community

Classroom community and critical reflection appear as separate components in the framework, but these components actually work collectively to build participatory citizenship. By empowering and encouraging each other, students begin developing a communal critical consciousness.

The critical consciousness that develops both individually and communally creates an environment of active learners engaging in a purpose. The classroom community fosters a dialectical relationship in which students are encouraged to learn from and with each other. With such a support system, students are often willing to push themselves to reach higher academic expectations and to participate in learning that encourages growth. Establishing communal bonds in the classroom can help close achievement gaps. Although the goal of community building is not to get students on board in order to produce higher test scores, research shows that academic achievement increases when a sense of belonging is established (Chung-Do et al., 2013; Johnson, 2008).

Although a sense of community can take place in a classroom in many different forms, I have observed Socratic seminars to be a productive avenue for engaging in the dialectical relationship. Prior to a Socratic seminar session, students engage in contextual relevant content through reading a text. Although students have reflected upon content previously, the Socratic seminars pushed them to begin collaboratively analyzing and evaluating both the text itself and the issues within that text. Since they are becoming participatory citizens, they are allowed to guide each other. These Socratic seminars eventually progress into higher-level questions that apply the text to the larger world. Students envision themes revolving around their modern society and discuss both the ugly and beautiful aspects of that society.

In the service learning project that partnered with the women's outreach center, students prepared for the Socratic seminar by reading a set of paired texts. One of the passages was from a historical primary text written by Florence Nightingale titled, "At Large Among the Stars." The other was a passage from Elizabeth Browning's poem "Aurora Leigh," which is a 19th century poem focusing on women's roles in England. These Socratic seminar sessions allowed students to start on an individual level, reflecting on what they had read in the literature or experiences within the service field. Then, through community discussion, students were able to hear perspectives they had never considered until their peers expressed them aloud.

Students had already started the process of developing participatory citizenship with personal critical reflections written down in some form, and they brought that reflection into a realm of communal exchanges where they could question each other and debate the issues. There was an intellectual dialogue flowing back and forth based upon a multitude of perspectives. Issues were never just black and white, with clear-cut stances. Students were doing a communal dance in the gray areas of our world. This gray area is one of the reasons why community discussions and critical reflection should work together. Once the process of sharing and debating about the issue was over, students came back to the process of individual critical reflection by writing to explore changes in their way of thinking based on new knowledge gained from their peers. Through the Socratic seminar and individual written closure, the voice of the classroom community was shared, but the individual voice was still valued.

### **Building a Service Project**

Once they have had opportunities to develop critical reflection and community, students can begin to find the true value of their learning by engaging in participatory citizenship. They continue to use the critical consciousness they developed through reflection and to participate in community as they build a service project. The environment of service learning is a messy place, just like the real world; it isn't perfectly arranged around textbooks, benchmark exams, and quizzes. Despite its messiness, however, service learning gives senior year a purpose while still maintaining academic rigor.

As Furco (2013) stated, service learning projects not only increase student engagement but also raise student GPA and writing skills. The ultimate goal for a service learning course should not be for students to have a warm fuzzy sensation of altruism. Although creating compassion and empathy is one of the most important byproducts of service learning, it is not the only goal. Service learning should also be academically rigorous, pushing students to develop critical thinking skills such as inference, synthesis, analysis, and evaluation.

Choosing to see seniors as participatory citizens means adapting to their thinking and their progress. This adaptation requires an incredible amount of organic and fluid guidance from the teacher. It is much easier for the teacher to follow set curriculum laid out for an entire year, but the extra effort exerted is worthwhile due to increased student engagement and participation (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013). A course revolving around service learning also requires both teachers and students to adjust to failure. Error often terrifies teachers, who may see correcting error as their primary purpose. Every project has some level of failure: it might be minor failures in logistics that need tweaking, or it might be a complete breakdown in the core ideas. Either way, failure opens up a space for students and teachers to return to critical reflection.

With the women's outreach center service learning project, students began the actual project by developing research questions and investigating the needs of the community. This information was then presented to the class in order to develop a dialogue revolving around prioritizing service needs. Students listened to multiple options for service projects and debated for or against different proposed service areas before they ultimately focused on a specific women's outreach center within their city. This process incorporated argumentation skills and allowed students to apply their knowledge and their analytic skills to the community, giving real-world value to the learning. Students were no longer researching an abstract topic merely to receive a grade on a senior research paper over rhetorical analysis in Shakespeare or the war in the Middle East. They were connecting their academic skills with the concrete reality of women's issues in our society.

Once the seniors in the course decided on a community partner, action plans were formulated to develop the service partnership with the women's outreach center. Students met with the community partner to discuss needs, evaluated which resources best applied to the project, analyzed the logistics of the project, and created a timeline. Ultimately, after meeting with the community partner to explore the needs of the women's outreach center and collecting research, the students chose to hold a fall festival for the women and the children who used the outreach center.

Students created teams and assigned roles. While one group of students might be in charge of painting and planting fall flowers to refresh the outreach center's appearance for its clients, other groups were in charge of refreshments, games, and supplies. Whereas brainstorming was done as a class, collaborative groups were assigned to the different stages of the project, each time turning in their products and presenting them to the class for peer discussion and evaluation.

Throughout the service project, students evaluated and assessed it through individual assignments. For instance, they wrote individual essays in which they explored the weak components of the project, once again allowing them to reflect. After critical reflection took place, the process expanded further into a communal critical reflection through classroom discussions in which students actively exchanged thoughts and perspectives on the issues within the service project. Socratic seminars came back to the classroom as an activity for sharing experiences in the project and analyzing its weaknesses. Students returned to a collaborative process of acting on these weaknesses by digging deeper into the action plans in order to implement changes for future service projects. Knowledge was constructed early in the project. Nevertheless, students were allowed to consider new knowledge and apply this to their service projects, developing an attitude of growth and ongoing construction of knowledge that is needed in the current dynamic world.

## Conclusion

Based on her observations in high schools, Cushman pointed out, "In a million little ways, students are watching to see whether we regard them as citizens or as subjects" (2005, p. 323). Seeing students as potential participatory citizens can have a powerful effect on their belief in themselves. Research shows that students greatly gain both academic motivation and behavioral motivation when participating in service-learning that values their voice and problem solving within their own communities (Kahne et al., 2013; Root & Billig, 2014).

We need to build a bridge that allows seniors to cross over from adolescence into the realm of democratic citizens. We should not, however, push them across that bridge without allowing them to build the efficacy or the skills needed to thrive. By establishing practices of critical reflection and classroom community, the service-learning framework described in this article provides the space to innovate, the space to fail, and the space for problem-solving that prepares students in their last year of high school to enter the adult world as participatory citizens.

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