

DIVERSITY

Shelley H. Billig, RMC Research Corporation, 2008

What Is Diversity?

Diversity in service-learning is widely recognized as being multidimensional, and includes understanding and mutual respect for different points of view. Projects with effective approaches to diversity help service-learning participants to identify and understand multiple perspectives and develop interpersonal skills in decision-making and conflict resolution. Within service-learning activities, it is particularly important to actively seek to understand and value the backgrounds and perspectives of those offering and receiving service, and to recognize and overcome stereotypes.

Application to Service-Learning

- Spring, Dietz, and Grimm (2007) from the Corporation of National and Community Service investigated teenagers from economically disadvantaged communities who engaged in volunteerism. The report showed that youth from economically disadvantaged communities were much less likely to volunteer than those from other backgrounds. Youth from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to volunteer so they could gain skills for work or school. These youth had more positive civic dispositions and behaviors relative to their peers, but were less likely to have access to service-learning. Teachers were found to play a key role in motivating youth from disadvantaged circumstances to volunteer.
- Weah, Simmons, and McClellan (2000) wrote that service-learning can help students go beyond personal perspectives to learn the perspectives of multiple others; provides a structured opportunity to reflect on and discuss concerns about race, culture, or other differences and a way to practice respect for diversity; and gives an equitable opportunity for all to participate in devising solutions to social problems.
- Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that greater diversity in service-learning programming was related to academic engagement, valuing school, enjoyment of subject matters, civic dispositions, and civic engagement.
- A service-learning diversity taskforce collected information from 36 focus groups and multiple study groups that discussed diversity and service-learning. From these data, Simmons and Toole (2003) concluded that there was a fundamental lack of consensus about the mission of service-learning and its relationship to diversity. Some practices were counterproductive to diversity aims, such as the “missionary ideology” underlying some approaches that led to reinforcing stereotypes and the imbalance of power in the relationship between social groups. Simmons and Toole suggested that negative outcomes were more likely to occur when there is a lack of understanding of the importance of diversity as reflected in a lack of understanding of the need for and content of the pre/post reflection activities; lack of awareness of one’s own cultural lens; lack of professional development on this topic; and the lack of good practice due to time constraints. They recommended that service-learning practitioners start with the provision of service to their own communities before offering to serve a community with people whose backgrounds are different. The authors also suggested that the missionary ideology is less likely to occur when service is based on an asset rather than a deficit mode, when issues of culture are directly addressed, and when service is discussed in the larger context of societal needs and cultural traditions of those offering service and of those being served.
- Hammond and Heredia (2002) showed that service-learning fostered diversity in the Washington Unified School District in multiple ways, including helping others to acquire literacy, helping individuals to become “cultural brokers” from different communities, and finding mutual benefits, with those being served learning through the wisdom of multiple cultures.

- Gregory, Steinbring, and Sousa (2003) and Hobbs (2001) investigated the volunteerism of individuals from Latino backgrounds. Discussing the results of three focus groups with 18 participants, Hobbs noted that Latino volunteerism occurs in the context of family, church, and neighborhood and is not often construed as being service or volunteerism. Rather, this type of service is viewed as simply “helping others.” If service or service-learning is to be scaled up in this community, cultural traditions and norms need to be taken into account, including the need to spend time to get to know the individuals and culture and to establish strong interpersonal connections before being accepted.
- Vang (2004-2005) wrote that refugees, immigrants, and migrants can benefit from being providers or recipients of service, but that special attention must be paid to the challenges being faced by these communities. Service-learning is an unfamiliar concept in many cultures, and there may be resistance due to cultural traditions or internal politics. There is a need to help individuals to adapt, but the service needs to be culturally sensitive and to avoid the missionary ideology. Benefits can be considerable, including nurturing leaders, building infrastructure, and promoting international understanding.
- In summarizing characteristics of service-learning practices in urban settings, particularly for African American students, Keith (1997) noted that multiple researchers, writing in the mid 1990s, “concluded that schools should be responsive to diverse styles of learning, cognition, and motivation. The minority students studied tended to learn more when knowledge was presented in context (“field sensitive”), when the learning process was collaborative, when they could see the relationships between their efforts and accomplishments, and when they engaged in activities that allowed repeated experiences with success and therefore promoted patterns of internal attribution. Finally, as learning involves more than learning tasks, relationships were also important. More learning occurred when teachers were perceived as caring” (p. 137).
- LaPointe (2004) provided similar suggestions for Native Americans, noting that the strong cultural traditions promote service, but not necessarily in the ways in which service-learning fosters service. Understanding the history and traditions of the community is critical to success, along with the idea that service-learning must be seen as a mutually beneficial experience.

Educational Research Supporting This Concept

- Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson, and Allen (1999) demonstrated that students who socialize with individuals from multiple cultural backgrounds are more likely to be tolerant of diverse ideas, accepting of people unlike themselves, and are more likely to be culturally aware.
- Secada (1989) defined equitable learning as different from equality. In his view, equality is quantitative and refers to parity among groups for a measurable set of factors or on some index. Equality is qualitative and concerns justice. For schooling, this means that some students may need additional assistance or materials, not just access to the same materials and resources that other students have.
- Boykin (1994) studied differences in learning styles between African American and Euro American students and concluded that African American students outperformed their peers when tasks stressed cooperation rather than individual performance.
- The Kentucky Department of Education (2003) defined multiple strategies for equitable learning, including strategies that addressed classroom structure, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. Equity in school culture is expressed through having high expectations for achievement for all students, involving multiple stakeholders in decision making, assigning personnel so that their strengths are maximized, using multiple communication strategies to reach all interested parties, and specifically stating the value and importance of equity and diversity. Equity in curriculum and materials is reflected in the types of textbooks that are selected, the accessibility of the curriculum to all students, and connecting

curriculum to everyday life and experiences (Kentucky Department of Education, 2003). All students must have access to curricular materials, including technology. Instruction should be ‘learner-centered.’

- Sellers, Roberts, Giovanetto, and Friedrich (2005), summarizing the research on teaching mathematics, science, technology, and engineering, suggested that diversity goals would be achieved when educators know the diverse backgrounds of their students and the implication of those backgrounds for learning; identify the curricular, teaching, and assessment practices that promote equitable learning opportunities; draw upon the diversity of students to enhance and enrich teaching; and recognize existing inequities and address them through the promotion of an inclusive and respectful environment for learning. Their framework provides a rubric with measures for each of these dimensions.
- Researchers who conducted a literature review of effective teaching practices for Hispanic students concluded that culturally-responsive instruction results in improved acquisition and retention of new knowledge; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; better transfer of school-taught knowledge to real-life situations; and exposes students to knowledge about other individuals or cultural groups (Rivera & Zehler, 1991)
- Peregoy and Boyle (2000) found that when teachers provided instructional activities that were based on familiar and “real-world” concepts, students demonstrated stronger gains in literacy and content learning and felt more comfortable and confident with their work.
- August and Hakuta's (1998) comprehensive review of research on effective instruction for Hispanic students found that having opportunities for extended dialogue (such as in reflection activities) enabled students to practice their English skills and perform better on measures of academic success.

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