



Traditional Values and Service-Learning

Source: John Guffey, August 2008

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“In the beginning there were the Instructions. We were to have compassion for one another, to live and work together, to depend on each other for support. We were told we were all related and interconnected to each other.”

- Vickie Downey (Tesuque Pueblo), Wisdom's Daughters

This fact sheet describes the structures and processes of service-learning associated with the linguistic, cultural, and biological survival of Native, or First People. By definition this refers to the people and traditional values associated with specific ecosystems and communities identified with particular ancestral homelands or their surrogate, the reservation.

Service-Learning and Interrelationship

People learn different things and different customs according to the interactions they experience within their specific context or community. For the indigenous community, the orientation to land, nature and traditional values forms the context out of which service-learning emerges, is expressed, and becomes part of the culture.

Among indigenous communities, service-learning, like culture, is shaped through relationships. Interrelationship becomes a key factor in understanding the traditional values and the everyday practices within these communities. Therefore service-learning in the indigenous context is offered as an experiential approach to education emphasizing the relational aspects of individual development and cultural acquisition.

Traditional knowledge and values forms the basis for significant service-learning curriculum and instruction. In the Northwest, communities are once again practicing the art and science of canoe building. Young people are called upon to help in this work, thereby learning the meaning and significance of these activities to their way of life and their wellbeing. In the Southwest, agricultural communities along the Rio Grande are turning to traditional ways for sustaining practices. Community gardens and local productivity is nurtured, as always, by young and old members of the pueblo. In these communities, bread ovens dot the landscape, and in the presence of their elders, children have the opportunity to share the meaning and significance of these ovens through their maintenance, construction, and frequent use. In the Northern Plains, giving back to Maka Ina, “Mother Earth,” is recognized as a function of the relationship between humans and creator. Connections to nature are recognized in all aspects of the human experience and are celebrated in the ceremonies, language, and daily life of the people. Taking care of the earth is a complex activity that takes many forms which young people must practice and participate in as part of their socialization and maturation.

Roots and Relevance

Learning rooted in the context of community underlies all aspects of indigenous life. Learners are nurtured and community needs are met through service-learning activities. When learning is grounded in service to the larger community the reciprocal effects of giving and receiving are experienced. From this foundation, education ceases to segregate or institutionalize the learner, now engaging him or her in movement toward the connection of individual, community and culture.

Indigenous people have concepts and customs understood and practiced in many communities today that precede what is now called “service-learning”. In the Cherokee language, *gadugi* refers to the practice of people helping each other. In the Keres language of Acoma and Laguna pueblos, *siyudze* is understood to mean “everybody’s work,” and in Navajo, the phrase *laana nisin* glosses as “that which we all desire together.” The traditional work of service-learning includes annual clearing of irrigation ditches, for which songs and ceremonies are performed, erecting dwellings, preparing for, conducting and cleaning up after feast days, as well as conducting many other sacred and social activities for the benefit of the whole community.

Native American children, like all people, need positive, meaningful learning experiences. If school is irrelevant to one’s life, this need is most likely to go unmet. Learning in the context of community, where value is added in the process of giving and receiving, gives children the experience and meaning needed to understand their role as participants in the daily life of their cultural and environmental context.

Learning in Relation

Everything exists in relation to something else. Community, placed at the center of service-learning, provides a meaningful context for orienting individuals and society in their relationship to nature, history, and human values.

Native leaders are taught to be servants of the people and today this service includes utilizing the “best of both worlds” to help educate and prepare young people to be active, engaged members of their communities. Efforts to operationalize this principle contribute to the ongoing involvement of youth in service-learning opportunities to develop the skills that will help them become leaders in their own right.

In summary:

- Indigenous people have concepts and customs for what is now called “service-learning” which are understood and practiced in many communities.
- Native ways of learning are recognized as being rooted in the context of community.
- Traditional values are still strong and can form the basis for significant educational content and practice.
- Native knowledge of the natural world is based on relationships and mutual respect, or interdependence.
- The world of nature and culture is holistic and one part is not more important than another. All parts interact and cannot be reduced to individual elements.
- Service-learning, like traditional values, finds its basis in direct, interpersonal relationships and the development of community in the context of place or

environment.

- Service-learning requires an array of learning opportunities that emphasize active, engaged participation in intergenerational settings.
- The cultural and ecological environment in which service-learning occurs helps form the learner's sense of self-efficacy.
- Service-learning, like culture and language requires participatory learning and direct interaction within the primary service community.
- Service-learning empowers students to learn in and through the indigenous context.
- Service-learning provides the learner with experiences that are relational, interactive and transformative.
- Service-learning supports indigenous self-determination by focusing on local needs and relationships in education.
- Service-learning encourages learner control and responsibility and thus helps create complex patterns of relationship within diverse socio-cultural and ecological contexts.
- The optimum value of service-learning is to empower students to achieve according to the ecology and indigenous values of their particular setting in order to assure self-determination in a diverse society.



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http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/tribal_facts/values/

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