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REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY GROUP PROCESS

While the principal objective of our work was to explore the assessment of learning through service, the process we used to do this is worthy of reflection. Our work, both at the state and national level, revolved around the formation and development of study groups. There are wide ranging opinions on how to define a study group and there are many permutations of study groups for different purposes and in different contexts. In fact, although given the same charge in this effort to study assessment, each state ended up with different types of study groups. Despite (or perhaps because of) these variations, we gained interesting insights into the study group process and continue to see this as a most valuable strategy for exploring ideas and, particularly, contributing to the professional development of teachers.

What is a study group?

Although there are surely more technical definitions, a workable way to describe our form of study groups is *a group of people that come together regularly over an extended period of time to study a particular issue*. The absence of any specific procedure in this definition may actually be its strength. By not strictly defining a particular protocol, the process that evolves is determined by and responsive to the members of the group.

Some local study groups chose to meet for “mini-retreats” — two-day affairs that helped the group bond and allowed for wide ranging discussion. Others met for two to four hours after school. One group met weekly for a while, others met only a few times a year. Some groups had more loose agendas and allowed the conversations to follow member interests, others had a more focused agenda that addressed predetermined topics. In the end, I don’t think we would say one approach was better than another. The process that works for a particular group is the one that seems most worth following.

Obviously, the format a group adopts depends a lot on context. States with a wide geographic spread, such as California or Maine, needed to meet less frequently but for a longer duration. Washington, D.C., with its close geographical proximity, was able to meet more regularly. Some groups had members who were more process oriented and willing to tolerate greater ambiguity and openness; other groups had members who desired greater clarity of purpose and direction. The strength of the study group process is that it can work in almost any setting for almost any subject with almost any group of people. The key to its success is the degree to which the process is made to work for those particular people involved.

Study Group or Work Group

Our various groups functioned as both study groups and work groups. Some participants wanted a clear distinction to be made, and felt it was important to respect the study group function to freely explore ideas and issues, without the need to concern themselves with any particular product. For these individuals, the National Study Group became a work group as it focused on producing this guide (which was a requirement of the grant funding our work), and we put energy into time lines, assignments, and tasks that determined the direction of our work.

Other study group members did not see this distinction so clearly. While they appreciated the study process that occurred the first year or two, eventually they felt that it was time to show some results for their efforts. For many, without a product to focus their work, all this study could begin to feel like talking in circles. While there needn't be a final report to guide study group work, it seems that some form of periodic milepost is useful to check-in on how the study group is going, what has been accomplished, what changes need to be made, and what should be future directions and priorities. Although there are probably some groups where open exploration and support meets members needs, for teachers, who are aware of the concrete realities of the classroom, some product resulting from the process helps substantiate the study group's accomplishments.

Benefits of Study Groups

All forms of professional development, including the study group process, aim for increased knowledge and understanding about whatever is being studied. This is certainly a benefit of study groups, and in fact, because of the on-going, collaborative, and inquiry-based nature of this process, it can be argued that understanding generated by this process is deeper, more long lasting, and more pertinent to the circumstances of each member of the group. Study groups are a prime example of constructivist learning, where participants make meaning around an issue important to them by thinking and talking with others. Because study groups are member driven, the topics are meaningful to the members and their learning is targeted to their own context.

Beyond the depth of learning, the other major benefit of the study group process we witnessed was the feeling of status it offered to teachers. Typical professional development approaches in schools involves some sort of "expert" (a college professor, an educational consultant, a state official, or a "star" teacher) instructing teachers on some aspect of improved teaching practice. This hierarchical model clearly places teachers as the lower status individual, expected to learn from someone more knowledgeable than they. Study groups, in contrast, can be tremendously empowering, as teachers learn together as equals. All members of the study group bring their experience and expertise to contribute to the learning of the group. In the case of our state study groups, the shared learning of teachers alongside "experts" from the state departments of education or from the world of higher education sent a

powerful message that teachers' knowledge was valued and valuable. It was obvious in these groups that teachers were honored for the perspective and experience they brought from "the trenches."

When teachers feel valued and empowered through the study group process, there is an on-going benefit for teachers to continue to see themselves as learners and teachers. Through membership in a study group, these teachers discovered a process they could use to study other issues in education. They came to see themselves as capable of guiding their own learning and contributing to the learning of others, and they came to see they had expertise and insights that could be helpful to others. These lessons are ultimately true professional development, not only contributing to increased knowledge, but also to improved professionalism for educators.

Shared Misunderstanding Somewhat paradoxically, the ability to see oneself as having expertise to share seemed predicated on also acknowledging a shared sense of incompetence. For many teachers, isolated in their own classrooms and having few meaningful opportunities to share their teaching experiences with others in a supportive environment, there is a persistent misperception that they are the only ones who face the problems they do in their teaching. Some teachers feel everyone else has fewer discipline problems, or is more effective reaching every student, or understands exactly how to assess student learning. Of course this isn't true, and once our study groups came to trust in their fellow group members and began to share openly and honestly, it became clear that many shared similar challenges. Everyone, it appeared, struggled with how to assess student learning, how to balance the need to address standards yet still honor the individual child, how to give feedback that improves the quality of student work, and how to give grades that are fair, valid, and helpful to encourage student learning.

Coming to recognize these are universal dilemmas for teachers cannot happen in isolation. *Only such collaborative structures as the study group can provide a venue for this honest sharing.* When teachers come to see these challenges not as individual shortcomings but as common issues inherent in the profession, teachers feel able to explore them collectively. When these issues are seen as universal, teachers can acknowledge their complexity, admit there are no easy answers, and begin the hard work of methodically and collaboratively making progress to improve their practice. Ultimately, this fits with what is known about the change process in schools and how any substantive and sustainable change takes years of consistent and persistent effort. The study group process mirrors the change process by being a sustained, constructivist, and collaborative effort that acknowledges the true nature of change in schools.

Collaboration and collegiality Perhaps the most important aspect of study groups is their collaborative and collegial nature. The presumption is that each study group member is there to study and learn. No member is expected to come as the expert to teach others (although

groups may ask for members or outsiders to “present” their expertise to the group at some point as a jumping off point for further study). Membership in our groups was determined by each member having some experience with either service-learning or assessment and having a willingness to learn with others.

This shared interest in studying issues of assessment and service-learning set the stage for collaborative inquiry. As study group members shared their experiences, it became clear that no one had all the answers for how to assess student learning through service. Everyone brought a different perspective and a different piece of the puzzle. Reconciling these different perspectives and developing shared understandings became the work of the study group. Being able to admit one’s own struggles depends on trusting others.

A safe place to reflect The study group affords a safe place for teachers to reflect on their practice. Because it is a shared, collegial experience, the study group contributes to a sense of identity and trust over time that can honor individual difference and tap into individual strengths. Teachers know too well how little time there is for reflection on their practice in the daily life of schools. The chance to reflect with others, to process experiences, and to explore new ideas is all too infrequent. Study groups directly address this need for reflection as part of the professional growth process.

Growth and Change Can Be a Messy Process

In the end, the power of the study group process was in its true representation of the growth process. The study group process is respectful of the fact that teachers know that there are no easy solutions for the complex issues they face. In truth, as experienced educators recognize, improving schools and one’s teaching practice is a journey. This journey may well have no definitive end in sight, the road may be pocked with potholes, and sticking to the path may be an act of faith at times. But for the teachers in these study groups, this process felt real to them — it wasn’t always easy and it didn’t always have immediate results, but it honored participants as professionals with expertise and experience to contribute, and, over time, it contributed to teachers’ own learning and sense of professional status.

Desire to Continue

Finally, because the agenda of the study groups is driven by its members, the study group experience is purposeful and personal. The work of the study group, while sometimes messy, was focused on the classrooms of the teachers in the group. This wasn’t abstract theory for the generic classroom and the typical student. The focus of the study group is the particular circumstances the participants face in their professional practice. Because this work is specific to their needs and context, in the end, almost all study group participants expressed a desire to continue to meet, to form study groups in their own settings, and to continue the struggle with ideas and issues that make them better teachers.

Appendix A: Members of the National Study Group

(by State/Organization)

[Note: members positions and contact information may have changed since publication.]

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Appendix B: Assessing Student Learning Through Service Bibliography

Compiled by Andrea Roufs, Learn and Serve America
National Service-Learning Clearinghouse
Phone: 1-800-808-7378; URL: <http://umn.edu/~serve>; email: serve@tc.umn.edu

Instructional Materials

Author: Cunningham, Marilyn

Title: *Assessment: an Integral Part of Experience and Learning*

Year: 1996

Availability: Located in "Issue 4: Curriculum Integration" section of Critical Issues in K-12 Service Learning: Case Studies and Reflections. National Society for Experiential Education, 3509 Haworth Dr, Ste 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229; Phone: 919-787-3263; URL: www.nsee.org

Abstract: The author notes how the academic validity of service learning is critical for the growth of service learning. She notes that assessment must show relationship to larger academic goals. Cunningham's model allows students to assess the content learned in service learning through their favorite method of documentation. Process learning is assessed by the stating of the learning objective, gathering of data, analyzing of data, generalizing, and communicating. Context learning is assessed through checklists, rating scales, and time sheets. A copy of a service learning activity sheet and student evaluation form are included in the article. (SH)

Author: Duley, John S.

Title: Learning Outcomes: the Measurement and Evaluation of Experiential Learning

Year: 1982

Pages: 8

Availability: From the "Panel Resource Papers" series; number 6; Jane C. Kendall, editor. National Society for Experiential Education, 3509 Haworth Dr, Ste 207, Raleigh, NC 27609-7229; Phone: 919-787-3263; URL: www.nsee.org

Abstract: The focus of the paper is to measure and evaluate the learning acquired by students in field experience education, not on program evaluation. Measuring and evaluating are but two steps in the six step process of evaluation. (SH)

Author: Melchior, Alan; Bailis, Larry

Title: Evaluating Service Learning: Practical Tips for Teachers

Year: 1997

Availability: Social Studies Review; v36 n2 p40-42 Spr-Sum 1997

Abstract: Outlines approaches for student evaluation in service learning projects. Maintains that most service learning project participants' goals fall into three broad areas: civic development, academic achievement, and personal or social development. Assessment in these areas can be accomplished through tabulation of service hours, student journals, and site supervisor evaluations. (MJP)

Authors: Renner, Tanya; Michele Bush

Title: Evaluation and Assessment in Service-Learning

Year: 1997

Availability: Campus Compact Center for Community Colleges; 602-461-7392

Abstract: "Evaluation and Assessment in Service-Learning" is a resource for those involved in service-learning who want to improve both their programs and their awareness of the far-reaching as well as the immediate impacts their programs have. This compilation includes both the why and the how of assessing service-learning programs and impacts, including student pre and post tests, surveys, and resources. Essays include: What are We Trying to Evaluate in the Name of Service?; How are We Doing? Or What Good is Evaluation Anyway? Observations from a Service-Learning Consortium; Service-Learning Program

Assessment: Quality Assurance and Survival; Service-Learning Evaluation: The Mesa Community College Experience; The WIN, WIN, WIN Relationship; The Compassion Connection: The Integration And Assessment of Service-Learning Within A Learning Community; Once is Not Enough: Assessing Service-Learning; Participatory Evaluation for Tutors and Learners; and Counting With Care: Assessing Dimensions of Community Development Focused Service-Learning. (author)

Author: Richardson, Scott

Title: Service Learning Teacher Training Manual

Year: 1996

Availability: Service Learning Unit, Close Up Foundation, 44 Canal Center Plaza, Alexandria, VA 22314; Phone: 1-800-CLOSEUP, ext. 487, or fax: 703-706-0001.

Abstract: A guide for trainers wanting to help teachers use service learning in their classroom. It covers integrating service learning with curriculum, using reflection in the classroom, increasing student and community involvement in project planning, assessing student work, and much more. (Author)

Author: Warren W. Willingham

Title: Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Experiential Learning.

Year: 1977

Availability: EDRS -- ERIC number is ED148840

Abstract: The Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning project (CAEL) has developed general principles for assessment of prior experiential learning which can be adapted for local circumstances and individual learning. An overview of the basic principles of good assessment practice, as represented in current CAEL publications, is provided. Procedural guidelines are presented, with reference to fuller discussion in other CAEL reports. An annotated bibliography of 27 CAEL reports is appended (ERIC).

Instrument Examples

Authors: Conrad, Dan and Hedin, Diane.

Title: Instruments and Scoring Guide of the Experiential Education Evaluation Project.

Year: 1981

Availability: National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Avenue, R460 VoTech Building, St. Paul, MN 55108; Phone: 1-800-808-7378

Abstract: As a result of the Experiential Education Evaluation project, the publication identified instruments used to measure and assess experiential learning programs. The following information is given for each instrument: rationale for its inclusion in the study; precise issues or outcomes designed to measure validity and reliability data; and directions on how to score. Descriptions of assessment tools are organized according to four categories: Instruments on Social Development (Social and Personal Responsibility Scale, Semantic Differential on Attitudes toward Others, Semantic Differential on Community Participation, and Career Exploration Scale); Instruments on Psychological Development (Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale and Janis Field feelings of Inadequacy Scale); Instruments on Intellectual Development (Problem Solving Inventory); and Instruments on Differential Program Impact (Characteristics of a Community Field Experience Checklist, Experiential Educational Questionnaire). The appendix contains the complete Experiential Education Questionnaire, pretest and posttest (ERIC).

Author: Davis, Kathleen M.; Miller, M. David; Corbett, Wes

Title: Methods of Evaluating Student Performance Through Service-Learning

Year: 1997

Availability: Florida Learn and Serve K-12, Center for Civic Education and Service, Florida State University, 930 W Park Ave, Tallahassee FL 32305-2059; Phone: 904-644-3174

Abstract: The authors note that though service learning is being widely used in school settings, measures to assess it are sparse. The document outlines some approaches and examples that might be helpful in examining effectiveness of service learning. Because service learning is so diverse, there arises many ways to assess it,

from formal procedures like Likert scales to informal measures (like open-ended reflections). Sample forms include service logs, rating scales, observation forms and checklists, journals logs, and portfolio instructions. (SH)

Study Examples

Author: Davis, Donald Raymond

Title: The Effectiveness of the Assessment of Learning Outcomes of Students in Experiential Learning Programs

Year: 1988

Publication Type: Dissertation

Institution: Southern Illinois University

Abstract: This study traced the development of the assessment of experiential learning from 1974 to 1986 and identified the most effective tools and techniques used to measure learning outcomes of students in experiential learning programs. The study asked 206 instructors and administrators of experiential learning about their program implementation data, purpose of assessment activities, types of assessment tools and the effectiveness of those assessment tools. Results indicate that written assessment was deemed the most effective tool for experiential learning. There is a national trend toward program enhancement in experiential education. Program improvement remains as a prime purpose of assessment and evaluation in experiential education. Simulation/Role Playing, Performance Testing, Self-Assessment, Debriefing Interviews, Product Assessment and Written Assessment were the identified as assessment techniques used by the subjects: Written Assessment being the most frequently used and most effective technique.

Authors: Driscoll, Amy; Barbara Holland

Title: Assessment Model for Service Learning: Comprehensive Case Studies of Impact on Faculty, Students, Community, and Institution

Year: 1996

Availability: Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, Fall 1996. Article 7, p.66-71; OCSL Press, University of Michigan, 1024 Hill St., Ann Arbor MI 48109-3310; Phone: 734-763-3548; Email: OCSLP@umich.edu

Abstract: A comprehensive case study model of assessment developed at Portland State University responds to the need to measure the impact of service learning on four constituencies (student, faculty, community, and institution). The case studies blend quantitative and qualitative measures in order to determine the most effective and practical tools to measure service learning impact and to provide feedback for continuous improvement of practice. Insights from the design process and preliminary results have potential value for institutions with similar agendas for service learning and community partnerships. (author)

Author: Hesser, Garry

Title: Faculty Assessment of Student Learning: Outcomes Attributed to Service-Learning and Evidence of Changes in Faculty Attitudes About Experiential Education

Year: 1995

Availability: Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning, v2 p33-42 Fall 1995

Abstract: Results of a survey of 48 college faculty from diverse disciplines and institutions support the hypothesis that faculty feel that both liberal arts and disciplinary learning derive from field study and service-learning, suggesting a shift in faculty attitudes about service-learning from skeptical to affirming. It is proposed that experiential learning and reflective practice have become established in higher education. (MSE)

Author: Kim, Simon; And Others

Title: Effects of Participatory Learning Programs in Middle and High School Civic Education

Year: 1996

Pages: 6

Availability: The Social Studies, v87 n4 p171-176 Jul-Aug 1996

Abstract: Evaluates three participatory civic education learning programs developed by the Citizenship Education Clearing House: the Election Program, Missouri State Government Program, and the Metropolitan Issues Program. Evaluation consisted of questionnaires, observation, and interviews. Discovers that the programs are both popular and effective. (MJP)

General Discussion

Authors: Blash Cumbo, Kathryn; Jennifer A. Vadeboncoeur

Title: What are Students Learning? Assessing Service Learning and the Curriculum

Year: 1998

Availability: American Educational Research Association; 1230 17th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-3078; Telephone: 202-223-9485; URL: www.aera.net

Abstract: This paper explores the meaning of learning in service by explicating how service learning links to current standards based reform agendas and how the academic learning associated with service learning can be assessed by teachers, professors, and community agency personnel. Cumbo and Vadeboncoeur seek to show how service learning can help produce a system of learning, teaching, and assessment that embraces democratic ideals, addresses real world issues, evaluates learning and teaching in authentic ways, and is based on high academic standards. (SH)

Author: Herrick, Michael J.

Title: Assessment of Student Achievement and Learning, What Would Dewey Say? A "Recent" Interview with John Dewey

Year: 1996

Pages: 13

Availability: Journal of Vocational and Technical Education, v13 n1 p17-29 Fall 1996

Abstract: An "interview" with John Dewey explores his view of educational assessment that measures both knowledge and its application as well as the impact of work and life experiences. His arguments for a unitary system that integrates vocational and academic curriculum are presented. (SK)

Videos

Authors: Cairn, Rich; Susan Cairn

Title: Assessing Learning Through Service

Year: 1999

Availability: Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, 550 Cedar Street, Capitol Square Building, St. Paul MN 55101; Telephone: 651-282-6743

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URL: <http://www.cfl.state.mn.us>

Abstract: In "Assessing Learning through Service," teachers in three Minnesota schools demonstrate methods of authentic assessment or performance-based assessment as they document what students learn through service-learning experiences. Featured tools include rubrics, checklists, portfolios, site supervisor interviews, reflection journals, student self-assessment, and teacher visits to sites. These programs help students meet Minnesota's new project-oriented High School Graduation Standards. The study guide includes copies of assessment tools shown in the video. The tape may be shown in four independent segments. The tape and guide are designed for staff development of teachers implementing service-learning programs. (authors)

Periodicals

Applied Measurement in Education

365 Broadway, Hillsdale, NJ 07642, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Educational Assessment

365 Broadway, Hillsdale, NJ 07642, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

Educational Leadership

Alexandria, CA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Educational Measurement: Issues and Practices

National Council on Measurement in Education, 1230 17th Street, Washington, DC 20036-3078

Journal of Educational Measurement

National Council on Measurement in Education, 1230 17th Street, Washington, DC 20036-3078

Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning

University of Michigan, 1024 Hill Street, Ann Arbor MI 48109-3310; Telephone: 734-763-3548

Phi Delta Kappan

408 North Union Street, PO Box 789, Bloomington IN 47402-0789

Organizations

American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum

One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 360, Washington, DC 20036; Phone: 202-293-6440

Works to improve higher education assessment practices and assist colleges in using assessment techniques to improve students learning. It provides information on recently developed assessment techniques and commissioned papers on higher education assessment. The Forum also offers consulting and networking services.

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Network on Authentic Assessment

Pacific Educational Laboratory, Suite 1409, 1164 Bishop Street, Honolulu, HI 96812

Phone: 808-532-1900; URL: www.ascd.org

ASCD sponsors special interest groups called networks to help curriculum developers and supervisors exchange ideas, solve problems, and collaborate on issues of mutual concern. The network on authentic assessment is facilitated by Kathleen Busick.

Cascade Educational Consultants

Terry Pickeral, 2622 Lakeridge Lane, Bellingham, WA 98226

Phone: 360-676-9570; URL: <http://www.az.com/~pickeral/>

CEC's website includes overview, rationale, challenges, and methods to assess the impact of service-learning on students, teachers, schools, and community. It also includes models for assessing program impact and effectiveness.

Clearinghouse for Higher Education Assessment Instruments

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 212 Claxton Education Building, Knoxville, TN 37996

Phone: 615-974-3748

Gathers information on standardized and faculty-developed instruments and methods to assess the outcomes of higher education. The clearinghouse provides collections of assessment instruments on student services/student development, institutional effectiveness, basic skills and general education, affective

assessment, portfolio assessment, and assessment instruments in the major.

Constitutional Rights Foundation

601 South Kingsley, Los Angeles CA 90005; URL: <http://www.crf-usa.org>

Publishes the CRF Network Newsletter on a regular basis, which carries information on new books, mini-grants, current materials, and descriptions that include assessment of school/youth/service partnerships.

The Council of Chief State School Officers State Education Assessment Center

One Massachusetts Avenue NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20001-1431; Phone: 202-408-5505

The Council established the State Education Assessment Center to improve the quality and comparability of data on education, including state-by-state achievement data, indicators of quality in such areas as math and science, and performance assessment of teachers and students.

ERIC Clearinghouses on Assessment and Evaluation

The Catholic University of America, 209 O'Boyle Hall, Washington, DC 20064-3893

Phone: 202-319-5120

Acquires, selects, and abstracts education information on testing and evaluation, including measurement devices, research design, and methodology.

National Center for Service-Learning and School Change

333 Market Street, Harrisburg PA 17126, 717-787-6749

The center supports redesigning school structures, curriculum, and assessment practices through service learning.

National Council for the Social Studies

3501 Newark Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20016

Regularly publishes articles of special interest on civic education and school-based service-learning.

National Research Center on Student Learning

University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center

3939 O'Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15260; Phone: 412-624-7020

Explores how thinking and reasoning skills can be taught and examines how content in various subjects, particularly mathematics, science, and social studies, is learned. The center also investigates exemplary teaching practices and ways to teach students how to become competent thinkers, learners, and problem solvers. Research information is disseminated through a newsletter and technical reports.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL)

101 South Main Street, Portland, OR 97204-3297

Phone: 503-275-9500; URL: <http://www.nwrel.org>

Operates that Center for Applied Performance Testing, which exists to help schools achieve better assessment of student outcomes and use assessment and evaluation information more effectively. NWREL also maintains a collection of tests and offers a video series on assessment for teachers and administrators.

NWREL also has an assessment and evaluation program that translates for educators and community leaders the best research into practical, user-friendly resources and service for the assessment of educational results. For more information call the number listed above or visit <http://www.nwrel.org/eval/index.html>

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