

What is Service-Learning?

Even though there are many different interpretations of service-learning as well as different objectives and contexts, we can say that there is a core concept upon which all seem to agree:

Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining community service with opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge.

In 1990, the Corporation for National and Community Service conception of service-learning said that it:

- Promotes learning through active participation in service experiences
- Provides structured time for students to reflect by thinking, discussing and/or writing about their service experience
- Provides an opportunity for students to use skills and knowledge in real-life situations
- Extends learning beyond the classroom and into the community
- Fosters a sense of caring for others

What are the Characteristics of Service-Learning?

- According to the National Commission on Service learning, service-learning:
- Links to academic content and standards
- Involves young people in helping to determine and meet real, defined community needs
- Is reciprocal in nature, benefiting both the community and the service providers by combining a service experience with a learning experience
- Can be used in any subject area so long as it is appropriate to a learning goal
- Works at all ages, even among young children

Service-learning is not:

- An sporadic volunteer program
- An add-on to an existing school or college curriculum
- Logging a set number of community service hours in order to graduate
- Compensatory service assigned as a form of punishment by the courts or by school administrators
- Only for high school or college students
- One-sided: benefiting only students or only the community

The distinctive element of service-learning is that it enhances the community through the service provided, but it also has powerful learning consequences for the students or others participating in providing a service. Service-learning is growing so rapidly because we can see it is having a powerful impact on young people and their development. According to Eyer & Giles, 1999, service-learning is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems and, at the same time, reflecting upon their experience as they seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves.